



Human Figuration and Fragmentation in Preclassic Mesoamerica

From Figurines to Sculpture

Julia Guernsey

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In this book, Julia Guernsey examines the relationship between human figuration, fragmentation, bodily divisibility, personhood, and community in ancient Mesoamerica. Contending that representation of the human body in the Preclassic period gradually became a privileged act, she argues that human figuration as well as the fragmentation of both human representations and human bodies reveals ancient conceptualizations of personhood and the relationship of individual to the community. Considering ceramic figurines and stone sculpture together with archaeological data, Guernsey weaves together evidence and ideas drawn from art history, archaeology, and anthropology to construct a rich, cultural history of Mesoamerican practices of figuration and fragmentation. A methodologically innovative study, her book has ramifications for scholars working in Mesoamerica and, more generally, those interested in the significance of human representation.

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To the usual suspects, with love:

*My mother Rita Ford Guernsey,
my father Anthony Guernsey whose memory lives on,
my children Abigail Kappelman and Jack Kappelman,
my step-daughter Isabel Love, and my husband, Michael Love,
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Preface

This book explores how and why, over the course of many hundreds of years, representation of the human body in durable form became an increasingly privileged and circumscribed act throughout Preclassic Mesoamerica. This is a formidable task in many ways. The Preclassic period that I address spans over two millennia, from roughly 2000 BC to AD 250, and witnessed the development of representational traditions of art, often focused on the human body, which proliferated in a variety of mediums and, what is more, sizes, from massive blocks of carved stone to the smallest of modeled clay figurines. The contexts in which these anthropomorphic objects were used were just as diverse. None of these variables – the objects, the mediums, the contexts – was necessarily stable during the Preclassic period, and tracking their transformations, reinventions, and legacies constitutes the heart of my inquiry.

Human representations mattered in ancient Mesoamerica, as their abundance and diversity attest. Recognizing this is the first step. But this recognition, in fact, occurred long before the breathless descriptions of romanticized ruins by intrepid explorers of the nineteenth century and well before sixteenth-century accounts by clergymen bemoaning the use of “idols” by indigenous populations. It is attested by the sundry acts of ancient Mesoamericans who collected and preserved forms from more distant times, who repurposed earlier objects through acts of inscription and recarving, who enshrined and venerated objects from previous eras, or who even systematically broke, disarticulated, or fractured representations of humans in a manner more productively viewed as generative and constructive than punitive and destructive.

I came to this topic by way of a somewhat circuitous route. Having worked on Preclassic stone sculpture along the Pacific slope of Mexico and Guatemala for most of my career, I was a bit stymied by the lack of monumental sculpture that had been excavated at the site of La Blanca, Guatemala, where I was involved with archaeological investigations. Monumental sculpture was not absent from La Blanca, to be sure, and a modest corpus of fragmentary figural sculpture – a disembodied anthropomorphic head, a segment of a well-formed limb – existed. But these stone objects hardly competed with the corpus of figural objects modeled from clay, whose numbers were exponentially greater. Small, palm-sized clay figurines – equally fragmentary – abounded at La Blanca, and I was struck by the sheer quantity of human faces, torsos, and miscellaneous appendages that had been excavated from all sectors of the site.

And so, somewhat reluctantly, I began to think about figurines. What I found striking during my early forays was the lack of studies that integrated figurines with sculpture in spite of the fact that each was equally focused on representation of the human body. The more I looked, the more I realized that these distinct traditions – one small and focused on the medium of clay, the other large and (usually) of stone – had always, since the dawn of Mesoamerican civilization, been in conversation with each other, even if modern scholarship had ignored these dialogues. This book acknowledges and explores the ancient exchanges between these mediums, arguing that they were fundamental to the developmental history and significance of human representation in Mesoamerica. It gradually narrows its focus to the south coast of Mexico and Guatemala and the impressive sculptural achievements of the Late Preclassic period (300 BC–AD 250), but does so only after having explored the more encompassing arc of human representation throughout Preclassic Mesoamerica.

I begin my exploration in [Chapter 1](#) by tackling the methodological issues at stake throughout this book. One of the most expressive vehicles through which people structured their visual world and navigated the social paroxysms that characterized the Preclassic period was figural objects focused on the human body. Regardless of the material of their manufacture, relative size, or even contexts of use, all of the objects and their diverse makers contributed to the formulation of canons of human representation that would endure for millennia. Moving between these types of objects, which served vastly different social roles, requires data and strategies drawn from a variety of disciplines. The purpose of [Chapter 1](#) is thus to confront these complex issues squarely while also orienting readers to the many social dynamics of the Preclassic period, which gave birth to the earliest civilizations in Mesoamerica.

[Chapter 2](#) focuses on monumental stone depictions of humans during the Early (2000–1000 BC) and Middle (1000–300 BC) Preclassic periods. It casts its net widely, exploring the sculptural production of many different geographic regions and noting the creative solutions engendered to accommodate both iconic representations of individuals and more narrative compositions in which multiple personages interacted. It emphasizes the restricted distribution and relative rarity of stone sculpture in these early years of Mesoamerican history, when it nevertheless served the agendas of rulers who took advantage of its ability to define the physical and socio-political contours of their communities. Monumental sculpture grappled with the representational boundaries between the human and the divine, with expression of what it meant to be human, and with the potential of the human body to encode social difference.

But monumental sculpture in stone was not alone in its engagement with these ideas, as a consideration of an entirely different medium makes clear. [Chapter 3](#) makes this shift, pivoting from stone to clay and turning its attention to the many thousands of miniature representations that were far more abundant and accessible than their stone counterparts. Unlike stone sculpture, ceramic figurines appear to have been utilized by people from all socioeconomic sectors and paths of life. I survey the distribution of these figurines across the wide geographical span of Mesoamerica, highlighting the social contexts in which they were used. Figurines, although less grand and imposing than monumental sculpture, were far more pervasive and, I argue, vital to the ways in which human figuration was formulated, conceptualized, and – eventually – wielded as a sociopolitical tool in ancient Mesoamerica.

Chapter 4 narrows its focus to the south coast of Guatemala and focuses on the 5,000 or so clay figurines excavated at the site of La Blanca, which flourished during the Middle Preclassic period. While working over the course of the last fourteen years with the extensive collection of La Blanca figurines, I have peered back at the thousands of tiny faces that are so animated yet so enigmatic. The privilege of working closely with the objects has afforded me insights into the ways in which Middle Preclassic peoples articulated a sustained concern with corporeality and the expression of sensorial capacities. These tiny representations exhibit a palpable tension between individualization and more collective, repetitive aspects of human identity, an issue that becomes central to my study.

Although engaging, the La Blanca figurines – like most figurines throughout Mesoamerica – are also broken. Chapter 5 confronts the fact that investigators rarely encounter a Preclassic figurine fully intact. Most are fragmented, with heads separated from bodies and bodies missing some or all limbs. Fragmentation appears to have gone hand in hand with acts of representation, part of a persistent cultural trope that permeated all corners of Mesoamerican society and was reflected not only in figurine practices, but in monumental sculpture traditions as well as much later ethnohistoric accounts and mythological stories. Although stone sculpture endured acts of deliberate fragmentation, processes of bodily divisibility are most visible and pervasive in the corpus of Preclassic clay figurines. Figurines speak volubly, I posit, about both representation *and* bodily divisibility or the disassembly of the self. In so doing, they illuminate ancient concepts of personhood or what it meant to be human. Evidence suggests that ancient Mesoamerican notions of personhood are quite distinct from a modern, post-Enlightenment idea of the individual as possessing unfettered subjectivity and autonomy. Mesoamerican notions of the self were anchored in understandings of a person's indissoluble relationship to the larger community, the part to the whole. Although there were likely multiple and shifting understandings of individuality and personhood in ancient Mesoamerica, the self appears to have always been embedded in society; the "I" was inevitably a part of the "we."

Having established the extent and significance of figuration in both stone and clay, at both a large and small scale in the Early and Middle Preclassic periods, Chapter 6 turns to the exploration of why, along the south coast of Mesoamerica, there was an abrupt decline in the use of figurines at the cusp of the Late Preclassic period. As I investigate in detail, this cessation of the clay figurine tradition transpired alongside other momentous social shifts, including the advent of state formation, increased urbanization, and an explosion of monumental stone sculpture in both quantity and variety. Yet, as the chapter also broaches, not all regions of Mesoamerica witnessed a figurine cessation, and we learn much from paying attention to these disparities, which reveal the varied roles that figuration played in new strategies of social and political negotiation.

Chapter 7 builds on the evidence presented in Chapter 6, focusing on the south coast of Mesoamerica where the Late Preclassic figurine cessation was particularly acute. There, an outburst of monumental sculptural productivity orchestrated by ruling elites at an impressive scale took full advantage of the social significance and utility of figuration. Kingly bodies were inserted into increasingly complex narrative scenes, at times accompanied by hieroglyphic inscriptions, where they became the symbol par excellence of civilized

behavior. These new forms of monumental stone figuration, with their celebration of royal bodies and deeds, were unimpeded by competition in the form of small, clay representations of humans. I argue that this elite monopoly on figuration became central to the political discourse of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica. It was, nevertheless, deeply indebted to the figural experimentation that had transpired in many mediums, been deployed in diverse contexts, and served a multitude of social goals for millennia. I linger on a consideration of the potential mechanisms through which such a monopoly on figuration was facilitated and sustained, pondering how, and why, certain kinds of representation achieved precedence and power over others (after Wolfe 1999: 33).

The brief *Epilogue* revisits the central issues in the tumultuous history of Preclassic figuration. Perhaps most importantly, it argues that figuration's developmental trajectory in Mesoamerica hinged on the formal and conceptual ingenuity of actors from many regions and many paths of life. It played out in stone, in clay, and in an array of other more ephemeral materials. As this chapter concludes, human representation was central to the ways in which social decorum, political power, and understandings of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, of individuals to their larger communities, were materialized and negotiated in Preclassic Mesoamerica.

This book is a first attempt not only to explore the diverse extent of figuration in Preclassic Mesoamerica but to articulate its role in structuring the social world of Preclassic Mesoamerica. It is a synthesis of objects, data, and ideas drawn from many regions, commingled for the first time. My arguments are facilitated by an admixture of art historical analysis, archaeological data, and theoretical perspectives. For example, I move, throughout each chapter and the book more generally, from the presentation of data to discussion of far more theoretical domains, extrapolating the social, political, and economic roles of disparate figural forms. To do this, I cross bridges that many others before me have built, utilizing their analyses and interpretations of comparable data to pivot from the world of objects and things to the realm of ideas. This is standard practice, whether one is engaged with art history or archaeology or something that straddles a sort of interdisciplinary middle ground. In the world of archaeology, “inference to the best explanation” (Kelley and Hanen 1988; Wylie 2002) enables scholars to offer explanations for any given data points, evidence, or phenomena, which are arrived at through processes of elimination. Explanations less well supported are set aside, while those best supported by the material evidence are favored and built on. We “accept” the best explanations even while bearing in mind that, in the world of archaeology (or art history, for that matter) – where new data are always emerging and interpretations being refined – there is a critical difference between “accepting” and “accepting as true” (Hanen and Kelley 1989: 15). My arguments build on one another as I move from objects and data to ideas and interpretations, or from fact to inference. Although my book is an art historical one, first and foremost, I recognize that my methods often embrace the methodological tools of archaeology and utilize an “inference to the best explanation” approach that, for the sake of transparency, is important to acknowledge.

Perhaps another way to phrase this is to concede that the history of Preclassic figuration can be told only in a choral voice rather than a singular one. Although the Preclassic period gave rise to the first hieroglyphic writing in Mesoamerica, we lack the sort of contemporaneous textual accounts that

might illuminate the artistic practices of the period. Argumentation proceeds, accordingly, through the creation of webs of interconnected data and ideas assembled by many scholars over the course of the last century or so when Mesoamerican studies began to develop as a distinct field of study. An astute colleague recognized that the images included throughout this book confirm the choral nature of this project: they are an eclectic mix of classic archaeological field photos, informal field photos never intended for publication, professional photos, and photos taken in poorly lit *bodegas*, or storage rooms, throughout Guatemala and Mexico. Some were taken recently, others in the early twentieth century. I have included photos whenever possible, deliberately, instead of drawings, in order to convey the volume, contours, dimensions, and textures of objects, qualities often lost in even the best illustrations. The results may well disappoint those hoping for an aesthetically beautiful tome. But, for all their shortcomings, the images attest to the many decades of contributions by scholars, investigators, and field crew members throughout the still relatively youthful history of Precolumbian studies.

Put more succinctly, the convoluted and often surprising story of Preclassic figuration as told in this book relies on many decades of interdisciplinary investigation, insights, and reasoning. It hinges on both facts and the many inferences they have generated. The book can be construed as a cultural history, concerned as it is with identifying and exploring Preclassic *practices* of figuration and fragmentation – their significance and the ways in which they made meaning – as well as with understanding individual objects. It tells a story at once cultural and art historical.

The arguments assembled here have ramifications for scholars working in later Mesoamerican periods and anyone interested more generally in human representation and its significance. That said, I do not emphasize in this book the implications of my findings for later periods, nor contemplate how they might constructively be applied to the equally extraordinary representations of humans that came to characterize later eras of Mesoamerican history. That task is best left to other scholars who command those bodies of material. I view the ideas presented in this book as a contribution to – rather than the definitive, final word on – the story of human representation in Mesoamerica. It puts a new spin on an old story, opening up possibilities for profitably rethinking the past in innovative and exciting ways.

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Preclassic Figuration

Epistemological Premises and Problems

A central goal of this book is to contribute to what I think of as a “discourse of image theory” for Preclassic Mesoamerica. It pursues this goal rather modestly, with a focus only on human representations throughout this lengthy period. The “discourses” and “image theories” that I consider are both new and old: I am as interested in the ways we, as modern scholars, continue to define, organize, and understand ancient anthropomorphic representations as I am in the ways in which Mesoamericans articulated their own understandings of the human body and the social significance of its portrayal. In neither case, now or then, were these understandings static, and the patterns of continuity through time are as revealing as the moments of rupture and transformation.

The Preclassic period in Mesoamerica was marked by momentous events. It ushered in an era marked by sedentary lifestyles that, centuries later, gave rise to the first cities. It witnessed the aggregation of people in novel urban spaces as well as its corollary: the social tensions that inevitably arise in response to diverse people moving to and around newly constructed “life-spaces” (Thomas 2005: 168). It also saw the advent of state formation,¹ the birth of hieroglyphic writing, and, most importantly for this study, the emergence of a tradition of human representation that would leave its imprint on the entire trajectory of Mesoamerican art. One of the few constants throughout this extraordinary period in history was a fundamental recognition of the significance of human representation. What changed, I argue, was whose body was portrayed, and how and in what materials it was rendered. When, where, and why these changes occurred is the central focus of this book.

My task is complicated – or enriched, depending on one’s perspective – by consideration of the vastly different types of contexts in which figural representations were employed in Preclassic Mesoamerica. The spaces in which

representations of the human body were utilized include the plazas of sacred centers with their monumental stone sculptures, some of which weighed many tons (Fig. 1.1). They also include simple households if we add to the mix ceramic figurines, small enough to cradle in the palm of one’s hand (Fig. 1.2). Fortunately, there are many excellent studies of Preclassic stone sculpture and an increasing number of ground-breaking analyses of small ceramic figurines. But – and this is important – they rarely cohabitate the same volume, or benefit from questioning the very premises that lead us, as scholars, to continue to separate “sculpture” from other representational objects such as “figurines.”

This study aims to remedy this problem, at least for the Preclassic period. I consider who crafted diverse representations of the human form, who manipulated them, where they were employed, and how the patterns of their use changed through time, in as fine-grained an analysis as is possible with the extant data. It is in this sense that this book contributes to a “discourse of image theory” for the Preclassic period: as the story gradually unfolds, it becomes both about the ways in which representations centered on the human body constructed meaning and the ways in which we can think about these meanings and their social significance. It is also about how, at times, the flip side of representation is even more revealing – when human bodies carved of stone or modeled from clay were deliberately broken or fragmented into their constituent parts. Disembodied heads and decapitated bodies speak to the inherent divisibility of the human body in a Mesoamerican worldview, of the relationship between the part and the whole. They also speak to Mesoamerican understandings of the human body as a powerful vehicle through which concepts of individuality and social collectivity were articulated.

This is obviously a sweeping goal, perhaps one not so modest after all. It is also not without epistemological pitfalls. The Preclassic period that I address here spans over two millennia and concerns a geographic territory that is no less expansive, as a map showing the location of principal Preclassic sites illustrates (Fig. 1.3).² While the map in Figure 1.3 makes clear the geographic boundaries of this study, the term “Mesoamerica” is far less precise: it encompasses “an amalgam of cultural practices and beliefs” whose boundaries “fluctuated through time and territory” (Clark et al. 2010: 3). Mesoamerica started small, my coauthors and I wrote in 2010, expanding along with the phenomenon of city living, which was frequently signaled by the presence of stone sculpture and monumental architecture. By the end of the



Figure 1.1 San Lorenzo Monument 1. Photo by Richard Stewart, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives

Preclassic period, Mesoamerica nearly had achieved its maximum extent, stretching from the northern reaches of modern Mexico, south through Guatemala and Belize, and into the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador.

If I were to try to do justice, in all sincerity, to every sculptural form created during the course of the Preclassic period, including both large and small-scale objects, I would be tasked with assembling a corpus of hundreds of thousands of objects. That is obviously an unwieldy goal. In order to engage in the meaningful analysis of a more limited body of works, I have made several deliberate choices. For one, I pay special attention to the south coast of Mesoamerica, which encompasses the Pacific Coast and piedmont of Mexico and Guatemala from the modern town of Tonalá, Chiapas, in the north to Chalchuapa, El Salvador, in the south. To contextualize my arguments, however, I constantly reference data drawn from other regions with the understanding that the peoples of the south coast were always in communication with individuals located to the north, south, east, and west. I have also chosen to refine this topic by focusing

exclusively on representations of the human form, as I have already indicated. Anyone familiar with Mesoamerican art knows that this still leaves a lot to get through: the human body was absolutely central to monumental sculptural expression during the Preclassic. When one factors in ceramic figurines – the small, hand-modeled, clay objects produced in abundance during the Early and Middle Preclassic periods – the corpus of human representations is expanded exponentially, into the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands. So, while I do limit my discussion to human representations, I want to be clear that even this remains a daunting task. I trace the contours of human representation during the Preclassic period, zeroing in on certain key issues but, inevitably, neglecting others. There were any number of exceptions to the general rules I describe, any one of which warrants deeper scrutiny.³

The narrative that I construct in this book is an untidy, polyphonic one, even if narrowed to a specific region, limited time frame, and circumscribed theme. And that is, in my opinion, as it should be. Representations, particularly those of humans, were key to



Figure 1.2 Middle Preclassic ceramic figurine from La Blanca, Guatemala. Photo by Michael Love

visualizing authority in Mesoamerica; some of the earliest sculptures in Mesoamerica appear to portray rulers, whose bodies were monumentalized in stone (Fig. 1.1). But human representations did not necessarily, or only, begin with these goals in mind, a fact made especially apparent when one looks beyond monumental sculpture in order to think about figuration writ large. Once the lens of scrutiny is widened to include more diverse mediums, we can more fully appreciate the ways in which the history of human figuration transformed through time in Mesoamerica, beginning as one relatively accessible – at least in some forms – to most people and becoming, by the close of the Preclassic period along the south coast, a tool implicitly linked to specialized knowledge, privileged access, and divine sanction. By situating the study in this way, we can also identify and investigate the discourses and strategies of power – à la Michel Foucault (1983) – that were, in Preclassic Mesoamerica, indelibly anchored to the human form, its representation, and its accessibility.

At the risk of anticipating my conclusions, I believe that the social power of human representation was, eventually, appropriated nearly exclusively to serve the needs

of early Mesoamerican states, which emerged during the first part of the Late Preclassic period (300 BC–AD 250). Contextualizing this argument requires examination of the many sociopolitical transformations that paralleled, influenced, and/or responded to the transformations visualized in the artistic record. This study thus navigates between the imagery and the archaeological evidence, borrowing extensively from theoretical approaches grounded in the disciplines of art history and archaeology. But it also benefits from the wealth of anthropological, sociological, and interdisciplinary scholarship dedicated to exploring how the human body, in and of itself, was a locus for the construction of social identity.

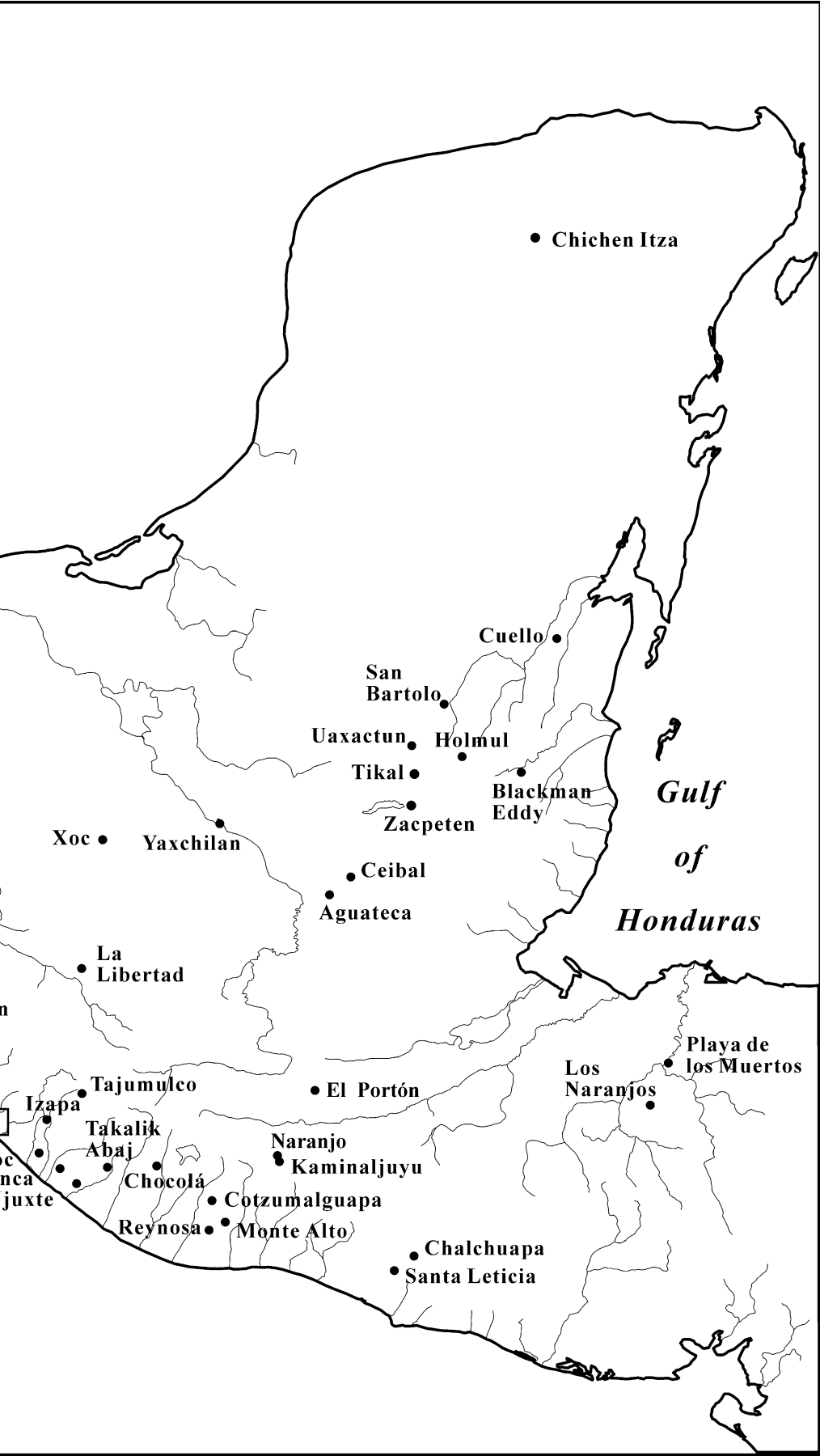
Throughout this text, I never presume that representations were merely passive responses to, or the epiphenomenal results of, sociopolitical transformations.⁴ Objects and images are the protagonists in this story, and I explore their affective presences, their roles in various “network[s] of intentionalities” and “system[s] of action” (Gell 1998: 6, 43). I view them as “potential site[s] of innovation” (R. Joyce 2008: 33) rather than as inert “backdrop[s] for human action” (Latour 2005: 72; also see Zedeño 2017), as essential mediums through which social change was formulated, as constitutive rather than accessory (borrowing from Baines 2007: 327). My premise is that human representations, in the form of stone sculpture and ceramic figurines, “actively construct[ed] the world in which people act[ed]” (following Dobres and Robb 2000) and were involved in implicitly conditioning and socializing an array of human actors (following Bourdieu 1977; Miller 2005: 6). Processes of material engagement mattered to ancient Mesoamericans, and acts of figural representation, in particular, provide us with the opportunity to explore their social and theoretical significance. As Colin Renfrew (2007b: xvi) asserted, “any figuration is, by definition, symbolic. It involves a representation and thus, usually, the prior existence of the thing represented. But that over-simplification should not obscure the power, in the hands of the creator of images, of calling new things into existence.” Phrased synthetically, what guides this study is my belief that the long, complicated, and deeply compelling story of human representation during the Preclassic period reveals much about the changing nature of visual art and its role in structuring and visualizing a variety of social processes.

Methodological Considerations

Using three-dimensional human figuration as my point of departure in this book enables me to cut across traditional classificatory boundaries such as those that isolate



Figure 1.3 Preclassic Mesoamerica. Map by Michael Love



“sculpture” from “figurines,” or that view stone monuments as categorically distinct from smaller objects crafted of clay.⁵ To be sure, there are meaningful and important differences in terms of scale, viewership, audience, context, techniques of manufacture, accessibility, relative portability, and so on, between stone monuments and ceramic figurines. But if we challenge ourselves to think beyond these differences, conceptual common ground also emerges (R. Joyce 1993). Consideration of both the points of intersection *and* departure between human representations of stone or ceramic, whether large or small, enables us to say something productive about the processes and significance of human representation in Preclassic Mesoamerica. Objects and representations of all sorts interacted in the past, and we are better off thinking of “human representation as a practice, not as an arbitrary segment of objects delimited by archaeological classifications” (R. Joyce 2002: 603). Such an approach highlights the moments of formal and iconographic exchange instead of overlooking them.

In a previous publication I confessed that art historians, such as I, are often guilty of a certain bias toward the monumental works that, still to this day, visually dominate many ancient centers. Monumental sculpture appears to have been, in many cases, the prerogative of rulers: certain types of sculpture were commissioned by them exclusively, and these monuments speak to the concerns of the ruling elite and the messages they wished to broadcast in large-scale form. This type of sculpture was typically of stone, and size appears to have mattered. Or, as I have previously stipulated, size was often an index of power, both political and economic, especially when the stone was procured from a distant region, hauled to a site without the aid of the wheel or beasts of burden, and then meticulously carved without the benefit of metal tools (Guernsey 2012: 1). In many ways, this study confirms my previous suspicions: size often did matter, as did materials and contexts. But this study also emphasizes the fact that understandings of the power of representation did not emerge out of an intellectual domain exclusively occupied by ruling elites. Many of the ideas involved in acts of crafting the human form were broadly shared by people from all walks of life and grew out of belief systems, sculptural processes, and formal solutions whose precursors are found not only in large public plazas, but also in the spaces of modest households. A focus only on monumental sculpture precludes deliberation of some of the most interesting and innovative aspects of Preclassic human representation. It also, more dangerously, neglects consideration of a broader range of social actors whose contributions to the problems of human representation were equally vital to the solutions

that were visualized on the public, monumental stage. In some ways this book is a grand adventure in avoiding essentialism: not just the “figurine essentialism” that Douglass Bailey (2005: 13) warned of, but also the “monumental sculpture essentialism” to which art history can, at times, fall prey.

There are definitional issues at stake in constructing my arguments. One is hard pressed to provide a tidy description of what constituted “sculpture” for ancient Mesoamericans. The term “sculpture,” in the English language, refers to objects, figures, or designs that have been carved or modeled or deliberately shaped in some way; processes of “making” or “forming” are implied.⁶ Yet in Preclassic Mesoamerica, naturally formed objects were often accorded the same veneration as sculpted objects. At the Middle Preclassic site of Zazacatla, in Morelos, a piece of unmodified cave flowstone whose shape resembles a seated figure was given the same reverential treatment as other monuments carved by human hands (Canto and Castro 2010). So, too, numerous Preclassic communities displayed “plain” stone altars and stelae whose contours were only subtly shaped by humans, if at all. Objects such as these point to an interest in the materiality of sculpture in and of itself rather than its role as a vehicle for modification or decoration. Ceramic figurines complicate this further: although considerably smaller than most objects readily classified as “sculpture,” they were crafted during the Preclassic period through processes of detailed modeling by hand. Each is unique and sometimes even carries the ancient imprints of the fingers used to form the clay. They were every bit as modeled, deliberately shaped, and formed as their larger stone counterparts.

These are issues with which I have grappled before, and which in part led me to think even more expansively in this book about the conceptual interrelationships between categories of objects. As I have argued previously (Guernsey 2012: 2), many scholars often categorize objects by medium, and so ceramic figurines are often grouped in archaeological reports along with other “ceramic objects” such as spindle whorls and roller stamps. Figurines made of stone are classified as “stone objects,” and listed alongside utilitarian *manos* and *metates* as well as jade beads. Large-scale sculpture, however, is usually found under the heading “monuments,” which divulges an emphasis on scale as a defining criterion. These categorizations, while completely rational, inevitably reflect our Western biases and methods of classification, and we should not presume that ancient Mesoamericans would have organized these objects in the same ways or viewed the boundaries between them as impenetrable. More than that, it is fruitful to consider the ways in which certain

themes or subjects – human figuration, for example – were explored between mediums, at different scales, for a variety of audiences, to serve agendas that ran the gamut from the practical to the ritual and political (R. Joyce 1998, 2002).

I am not by any means suggesting that we do away with the very expedient organizational schemes that guide much scholarship; I have spent enough years working on archaeological projects to recognize the necessity of such systems, which accommodate the ordering of a multitude of diverse objects. I, too, adhere to standard organizational schemes throughout this study: my chapters address “sculpture” and “figurines” separately, perhaps belying my own affinities for traditional taxonomies and an inadvertent reliance on (problematic) positivist legacies. I inevitably, at some level, succumb to the “tyranny of the category” in this book (Freedberg 1989: xxii).⁷ But, in my defense, I would stipulate that I recognize the utility of taxonomies as categories of analysis even if I do not view these categories as a system of meaning that reflects ancient Mesoamerican sensibilities. What I advocate for, throughout this study, is greater scrutiny of the gray areas between these categories, of the ways in which different types of objects “spoke” to each other, and of the legacy of these dialogues. If we pay attention to only one of these stories – say, monumental stone sculpture, to the exclusion of small ceramic figurines – we are writing incomplete histories.⁸

Some of these issues are particularly relevant to the field of art history, which has often distinguished, for better or worse, between “high” art, which includes “masterpieces,” and “low” art, which includes crafts and utilitarian objects (Freedberg 1989: xix). Such distinctions are neither terribly helpful nor pertinent when it comes to ancient Mesoamerica, where even the term “art” is problematic. Carolyn Dean (2006: 26) directed attention to the semantic conundrums especially acute in non-Western scholarship, noting that the lack of any “globally acceptable definition of art is the elephant in our disciplinary living room.” Her point was that by utilizing the term “art” to describe the creations of people who may not have had a concept of art or, if they did, one that differs from our own, risks “re-creating societies in the image of the modern West.”⁹ By the same token, however, and invoking the work of Hayden White (1983: 129), she cautioned modern scholars against any vainglorious attempt to “see” objects from an ancient, indigenous point of view. Dean (2006: 29) advocated, instead, that scholars “take cues” from the very people who crafted the ancient objects by scrutinizing them alongside the “still-visible traces of their practices.” In

Preclassic Mesoamerica, patterns of ritual accompanied the use, dedication, and veneration of the refined “masterpieces” of sculpture as well as the small, hand-modeled figurines produced in extraordinary abundance. Much can be gained not only by exploring these objects and the visible traces of their use but also by paying sustained attention to the potentially dynamic relationships that existed between types of objects, materials, functions, and contexts in the ancient past. Scrutiny of these relationships also moves us beyond questions of *what* – with its emphasis on taxonomic attributions and their delimitations – and into the domain of *why*, in which we can wrangle with issues of practice, context, and association. Even if questions of “why,” when directed at the creative production of Preclassic Mesoamerica, may not always be answerable, at least not fully, they should still be asked.

Throughout this book I consider evidence that comes from a variety of social sectors and pay special attention to what the changing scale, materials, and contexts of carved or modeled depictions of humans tells us about the social significance of representation during the Preclassic period. My chapters weave back and forth between the “high art” of the “public” plazas of ancient cities, and the figurines recovered from “private,” “domestic” contexts or intermixed with the detritus of daily life.¹⁰ Binaries such as these – high versus low, public versus private, elite versus commoner – pepper my study as they do much of the archaeological and art historical literature in Pre-Columbian studies. Rather than serving us well, Whitney Davis (1993: 254) argued, they “break down in any reasonably sophisticated view of representation and its role in social life.” I do not doubt the veracity of Davis’s claim, but I would counter that such categories are, nevertheless, useful, even though they by no means represent an empirical reality. What they provide is a framework for structuring categories of analysis based on opposites and stark contrasts, with one heuristic categorical extreme presupposing the other. Optimal utility of such an organizational strategy requires, ironically, recognition of the fact that it is, by nature, overly simplified, that it neglects the intermediate spaces between its analytical poles. I invoke a number of binaries throughout this study, but only in order to call attention to the paths of exchange that existed between them. Figural representation in Preclassic Mesoamerica truly took shape in the expanses in between.

High Culture

The story of human figuration told in this book culminates in the Late Preclassic period. Or, better said, it

contextualizes the explosion of monumental sculptural activity during the Late Preclassic within the many hundreds of years of figural experimentation and conceptualization that preceded it. The sculptural achievements of the Late Preclassic period were, indeed, remarkable, but they were also deeply indebted to what had come before. Their success was further amplified because it coincided with a dramatic cessation, at least along the south coast of Mesoamerica, of the ceramic figurine tradition that had thrived for over a millennium. This coincidence, I argue, was not serendipitous. The two phenomena – the debut of an innovative Late Preclassic sculptural tradition and the waning of a centuries-old figurine tradition – are best understood in concert, one as the beneficiary of an awareness of the power of figural forms and the other, perhaps, its victim. Again, although I do not wish to give away prematurely the ending to the long and circuitous story of Preclassic figuration traced in this book, I believe that the conceptual significance of human representation was not lost on Late Preclassic rulers who increasingly appropriated its devices in order to assert their social, political, and economic privilege. But recognition of this significance was not an invention of the Late Preclassic period, nor of elites only: it was an ancient idea, deeply understood and attested in myriad ways by people from all walks of life who had been engaged with the crafting of human representations for many centuries.

Broadly shared recognition of the power of human representation, which was nurtured, defined, and surely redefined repeatedly throughout the course of the Early and Middle Preclassic periods by people from all socioeconomic sectors, fueled the monumental art traditions of the Late Preclassic period whose legacies endured for centuries. These Late Preclassic monumental art traditions, many anchored in the representation of kingly bodies or, at the very least, the portrayal of bodies in the service of the king, constitute a system of representation best thought of as an integral component of “high culture.” John Baines and Norman Yoffee (1998) developed a theoretical model for understanding the concept of “high culture” in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, which was later summarized and refined in a second publication (Baines and Yoffee 2000).¹¹ Their model serves as an enormously useful point of departure for this study and, especially, my arguments in Chapter 7, which focus on the monumental sculpture of the Late Preclassic period. According to Baines and Yoffee (1998: 203), high culture was expressed through specialized rituals, objects, and symbols that were wielded exclusively by rulers and their elite cohort in order to define themselves as qualitatively distinct from non-elites.¹² This suite of elite material culture and ritual formalized a system of inequality as well

as “a ‘core-periphery’ structure with the external world” in which ruling elites occupied the center; the rest of society pivoted around it. They linked the development of these ideas and traditions to the burgeoning of urban centers and the advent of state formation in the Old World, a point that is equally salient to discussions of high culture in the New World.

Baines and Yoffee framed their arguments around three key ideas, each equally germane to the formulation of high culture: order, legitimacy, and wealth.¹³ Order refers to the ideological systems, integrated across political, economic, and religious domains, which are designed to maintain civic and cosmic order (Baines and Yoffee 1998: 253). But order, they qualified, is fragile: it cannot be taken for granted, and the repercussions of its successes and failures reverberate beyond the confines of elites. Non-elites share an interest in the maintenance of order because it is seen as both a “stabilizing institution” and “as an almost unalterable given” (Baines and Yoffee 1998: 238). Legitimacy is the process through which elites successfully appropriate and maintain order. Even though elites could not fully monopolize certain legitimizing forces, like religion, aspects of which were dispersed across the social spectrum, they nevertheless had “access to more grandiose varieties of it and to more of its profound meanings” (Baines and Yoffee 1998: 213). The same holds true in Mesoamerica: the corpus of Late Preclassic art makes clear that privileged access and control of certain forms of ritual by elites (in both economic and religious terms) was formulated as a cosmological imperative (after Wolf 1999: 280–281). The third component, wealth, was probably not the prime motive in the development and maintenance of complex social forms, according to Baines and Yoffee (1998: 213). They described it instead as “an enabling factor, one that has an extraordinarily powerful communicative and persuasive potential.” Lavish display, concomitant with the considerable appropriation of material resources, was legitimized, cast as central to the maintenance of order because elites were the “principal human protagonists and prime communicants to the deities” and, thereby, required the finest cultural products (Baines and Yoffee 1998: 234–235). High culture required artistic display and performance, and elites were “aestheticized” via an array of materials and practices (also see DeMarrais et al. 1996).

For Baines and Yoffee, high culture was constituted by elites and presented as immutable. It benefited from sustained attempts to obscure connections to earlier or non-elite traditions, which were recast as divinely inspired rather than derivative (see Helms 1993). Many of the hallmarks of Late Preclassic high culture attest to the

same tensions between tradition and innovation. Monumental art, by the Late Preclassic period, took full advantage of centuries of figural traditions, tailoring them to serve elite agendas. Sweeping changes accompanied the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic period, and the artistic record provides a particularly sensitive record of the ways in which new forms of authority and privilege were formulated and legitimated.¹⁴ Perhaps the Late Preclassic high culture system was a logical outgrowth of this tumultuous period in history: high culture systems are, Baines and Yoffee (1998: 252) asserted, “particularly warranted in times when new political leadership requires stabilization and legitimation.”

While compelling and productive to pursue, arguments concerning high culture are not without their limitations, and, in fact, Baines and Yoffee (1998: 211) were quick to note the biases of the ancient artistic record, which is “mainly monumental and centered on the ruling group.” George Marcus (1992: 294) recommended that scholars relentlessly problematize the “grounded practices of control and discipline that ensure the production” and visual materializations of elite ideologies. Susan Gillespie (2008a: 107) expressed similar concerns about a singular focus on the elite record, both visual and archaeological, which can result in the construction of a “totalizing scenario” that pays inadequate attention to the paths and forms of contestation, or that bills commoners as “people without history.” Creative responses and resistance to the dominant core of any civilization should not only be assumed to have existed, but should be a focus of intellectual inquiry, in spite of the fact that the dominant ideologies (*sensu* Scott 1990) are almost always more readily accessible to art historical and archaeological investigation (DeMarrais et al. 1996: 69).

Many of these same issues are pertinent to discussions of Late Preclassic sculpture, which was centered on the bodies and actions of elite individuals and came to serve their ideological interests (*sensu* Berger 1972: 86). This very privilege was one of the most powerful aspects of Late Preclassic art, in fact. But it was not novel: it clearly traces its ancestry back into the Early and Middle Preclassic periods when the communicative potential of human representations was first explored across a spectrum of media and scale by elites and others. What was new in the Late Preclassic period, at least along the south coast, was the elite monopoly on human representations, especially those crafted from durable materials (Clark et al. 2000: 469). If we stretch the boundaries of “sculpture” to include figurines, then we can conclude that the Early and Middle Preclassic sculptural corpus celebrated the bodies of peoples from many walks of life, crafted in materials both precious and readily available and at a scale that

ranged from the minute to the monumental. During the Late Preclassic, however, the boundaries of figural sculpture contracted, as Chapter 6 describes in detail. Along the south coast of Mesoamerica, in particular, opportunities for non-elites to “materialize ideology” in lasting figural form declined precipitously.¹⁵ Through a monopoly on durable human representations, especially when paired with an emphasis on monumentality, elites ensured that their bodies, alone, became the “repository of civilizational meanings” (Baines and Yoffee 2000: 16–17).

This is not to say that there were no challenges, active or passive, to the ideological rhetoric of Late Preclassic elites in regions where the figurine tradition waned considerably. There certainly were arenas for subaltern strategies of social expression that developed even while the horizons for crafting durable human representation narrowed. It is foolish to assume that the ideologies or strategies of dominant groups were necessarily or always successful. The appearance of new burial traditions during the Late Preclassic along the south coast, as much engaged with the human body as any sculptural representation, remind us of this (see Chapter 6 as well as Guernsey 2012: 118–119; Love 2016; Love and Castillo 1997; Love et al. 2002). The elite strategies and justifications of privilege explored in this book developed in conversation with complicated, and at times archaeologically unrecoverable, negotiations with many levels of society – a point I also consider. At the end of the day, the history of human figuration in Preclassic Mesoamerica provides one of the most substantive records for exploring these tensions. The imagery, objects, and contexts tell us as much about power as they do about its contestation. They become, in this story, central protagonists instead of passive markers of cultural or political change.

I take many of my clues from Janet Richards and Mary Van Buren’s (2000: 3) edited volume that called attention to weaknesses in the “high culture” model, which often fails to adequately consider the “points of interaction between elites and the populations they ruled.” Van Buren and Richards (2000: 9) questioned Baines and Yoffee’s assertion that the discourse of high culture was “restricted almost entirely to the inner elites, their rulers, and gods” and that individuals “outside this small circle play[ed] little if any role in the creation or consumption of high culture, even as audiences for legitimizing performances.”¹⁶ They argued that the endurance of civilizations hinged on the myriad and complex directionalities of exchanges that transpired between all members of society. Questions of order and legitimacy, Elizabeth Brumfiel (2000: 131) asserted in her contribution to the volume, always need to engage with a “broader interest in culture as it affects all social action.”

I do not, in this book, return to the idea of “high culture” until [Chapter 7](#), with its focus on Late Preclassic monumental art. And I do so only after contending with the vast array of figural forms, contexts, and people who were actively engaged in formulating the meanings of human representation at many scales and in multiple mediums. It is only by doing so that we can get at the deep and complicated significance of human representations for ancient Mesoamericans. My methods are informed by a commitment to go well beyond “the categories and objects of humanistic study that have built up in Western and other scholarship,” including the field of art history, and which often coincide all too readily with “high culture” models (Baines and Yoffee [2000](#): 17). To be frank, it was both my attraction to and deep suspicions of the analytical capacity of a “high culture” model that inspired much of this book.

The Meanings and Significance of Human Representation in Mesoamerica

One cannot pursue a study of the history of representation in Mesoamerica without paying heed to the complex interrelationships between acts of human figuration and ontologies of being. Fortunately, there have been a number of recent studies dedicated to better understanding ancient Mesoamerican ontological systems. Many draw from the art historical and archaeological records, but are also productively informed by ongoing advancements in hieroglyphic decipherment, which utilize textual clues to illuminate the ways ancient people understood images. Although I rely on the truly extraordinary advances in hieroglyphic decipherment since the mid-twentieth century, I do not wish to oversell their utility for elucidating the Preclassic period. Even though we can now speak of a robust Mesoamerican literary tradition, at least from the Classic period onward, its passages dedicated to describing practices of human representation do not compete with the vivid prose of Ovid’s *The Metamorphoses*.¹⁷ Recounted in that narrative poem is the story of Pygmalion, who fell in love with the object he carved because it was so beautiful and lifelike. Inspired by his own creation, he petitioned Aphrodite and was rewarded when, on bestowing a kiss to the statue, it came to life. The textual evidence in Mesoamerica lacks such poetic elaboration, but it nevertheless elucidates the significance of the materialization of human forms and has enabled the formulation of an intellectual framework through which we can – cautiously – begin to move back into the Preclassic period, an era without adequately deciphered writing systems.

In a consideration of evidence from the Classic period (AD 250–900), Elizabeth Newsome ([1998](#): 116) wrote that the Maya “ascribed a set of qualities and attributes to . . . monuments that defined them as ‘beings’ within the scope of their ontological universe.” Sculptures created by them were understood, she argued, as possessing “being, spiritual essence, and power.” Newsome ([1998](#): 122) likened these ancient conceptions to Robert Plant Armstrong’s ([1971](#)) notion of “affecting presences,” in which material forms generate “interactional dynamics of meaning that unite the observer and works of art.” Evidence for these understandings comes from the hieroglyphic record and, in other cases, is more circumstantial, gleaned through archaeological vestiges of the behaviors that accompanied the creation and use of these objects. Newsome noted that colonial accounts also preserve indigenous ideas concerning the potency of objects. She pointed to a passage in Bishop Diego de Landa’s sixteenth-century *Relación de las cosas de Yucatan* (Tozzer [1941](#): 159–160), which describes the carving of wooden idols and the various ritual prescriptions – fasting, abstinence, and the procurement of a certain type of wood – that accompanied their production, which was viewed as a dangerous endeavor. The idols were crafted in a hut that afforded privacy and secrecy and which was anointed with blood drawn from the earlobes of the artisans and sanctified with the smoke from incense.

Stephen Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube (Houston and Stuart [1998](#): 81; Houston et al. [2006](#): 58–62), following the early lead of Tatiana Proskouriakoff ([1968](#)), explored the significance of the Classic Maya hieroglyphic term *u-baab*. Unlike the Maya term *winik* (or *winag*),¹⁸ which means “person,” *u-baab* “relates less to a general meaning of ‘being’ or ‘person’ than with the material form of the person” (Houston et al. [2006](#): 59). Houston and Stuart argued that *u-baab* encompasses references not only to the self or person but also to objects or images that extended aspects of that self. There was, thus:

an extendable essence shared between images and that which is portrayed . . . The act of carving, modeling, or painting creates a semblant surface and transfers the vital charge conferring identity and animation to the original. (Houston and Stuart [1998](#): 86–87)¹⁹

Houston ([2004](#): 291) described this equivalency, in ancient Mesoamerican thought, between a sculpture, its representation, and the person portrayed as an “ontological fusion of spirit and matter,” in which “neither matter nor spirit is necessarily valorized over the other.” As Houston and Stuart ([1998](#): 87–88) put it, Classic Maya notions of the self superseded the boundaries of

the human body and extended to the domain of sculpture. Essence transferred along with likeness, they asserted, with an image embodying “more than a clever artifice that simulates identity; it both resembles and *is* the entity it reproduces” (emphasis in original). Matthew Looper (2003: 200–201) and Houston et al. (2006: 58–79) urged scholars to recognize the ontological implications of these beliefs, which indicate that the stone and stucco visages of rulers gracing Classic Maya urban centers retained their potency long past the death of the individual portrayed. Esther Pasztory’s (2005: 68–69) ideas of “anthropomorphic presence” are pertinent here, particularly as they relate to monuments featuring the bodies of rulers, erected in the plazas of large cities where rulers may have been quite invisible to most subjects. She suggested that “[t]he monuments took the place of ceremonies people may never have seen” and, thereby, became “public documents of official acts and history.” By perpetually materializing the bodies of rulers, monuments also perpetually materialized history.²⁰

It is problematic to extend these ideas, many of which are textually attested only during the Classic period or later, back into the Preclassic past, and any cautious scholar has learned to heed George Kubler’s (1973, 1975) vehement, but sage, warnings concerning the dangers of disjunction. Kubler recognized that the opportunities for reinvention, rupture, and revival were many in the ancient past, and that with them came new meanings cloaked in forms that, superficially, signaled continuity.²¹ In the field of Precolumbian studies, Kubler’s arguments – in spite of their obvious merit – were fiercely countered by some, most especially the archaeologist Gordon Willey. Willey (1973) maintained that methods of ethnographic analogy, or the direct historical approach, were warranted when inferences could be drawn among people, objects, and cultures within a geographically and historically circumscribed framework.²² In recent years, Mesoamerican scholarship appears to have achieved a healthy balance that owes a debt to those engaged with both sides of the argument. Most researchers agree that a direct historical approach, when undertaken cautiously and with an eye toward potential shifts in meaning and form, is fruitful.²³

Throughout this book I argue that there is convincing evidence that many of the notions concerning human representation attested in later periods were fully operational – albeit not recorded in textual form – during the Preclassic period. Perhaps even more importantly, I argue that the evidence for these ideas is present both in the form of large-scale stone monuments in urban centers *and* in the form of small, ceramic representations of humans utilized in more private spaces. My approach is

thus novel for its equal emphasis on both ends of the Preclassic spectrum of representation, from the monumental to the more intimate, from the public to the private, from elite to commoner. I contend that Mesoamerican notions of human representation were not developed in one socioeconomic niche or type of space but, rather, came into being through the interplay between the many people who moved between them. The insights gleaned from later periods, objects, and texts are enormously valuable for what they can tell us about corporeal fields for ancient Mesoamericans. My premise in this book, however, is that these notions of “extendible selves” emerged in great part due to the experimentation and creative expressions of Preclassic artists and artisans, who first grappled with the very problem of human representation.

“Representation” can mean many things. It is, as David Summers (2003: 3) stated, “often linked to resemblance and to the more general question of imitation.” The word representation, he continued, contains the word “present,” and presupposes the “presence of something as well as the presence of someone by whom and to whom representation is made.”

Repraesentatio is a construction around the verb “to be.” *Praesens* is a participial form of *praeesse*, “to be before,” which it means in two senses: the first is simple, spatial, prepositional location; the second involves precedence or command, being higher in rank, more important than. Perhaps then “presence” implies that which is not simply before us but which “stands out” and concerns us, that to which we are in a sense subject. (Summers 2003: 6)

In a similar vein, Stratos Nanoglou (2009: 157–158) argued that representations “are never floating signifiers; they always occupy a certain place in the world from which they address people and get addressed by them.”²⁴ Representation, Summers concluded, is communication, and although he was focused on the world of modern art, his points are germane to this discussion of the ancient Mesoamerican world:

I would argue that actual representation – something’s being put under one set of conditions or another in place of something else – is primarily *communication*, not the *expression* of private images or meanings (which we especially associate with art) but rather that which is effected *through the common*. In these terms the history of art embraces any number of artefactual histories in which the world at hand has been treated as if real for any number of local purposes. The commonalities cutting across these histories point to the common orientations and exigencies of human physical existence in the world of social

spaces in which we all find ourselves. (Summers 2003: 16, emphasis in original)

Human representation requires us to engage with “the process of concretization of philosophies of the body” that are visualized through choices of material, scales of reference, and the features included or excluded (R. Joyce 1998: 148; López Austin 1988). Bodies are socially constructed, Rosemary Joyce argued, following Judith Butler (1993), and representations of them become vehicles through which social constraints and ideals are naturalized or eschewed. For Joyce (1998: 147–148), Mesoamerican representations of bodies became the loci of “slippage between representation and bodily existence.” More than that, she argued, these slippages were part of larger social processes including the formulations of memory and history that Paul Connerton (1989: 72–73) linked to bodily practices. Joyce invoked Connerton’s distinctions between bodily practices – intimate acts that take place in what Michael Herzfeld (1991: 10) characterized as “social time,” or “the grist of everyday experience” – and inscriptional practices, which transform ephemeral acts into more permanent form and, thereby, “facilitate the creation of histories” written in more “monumental time” (R. Joyce 1998: 157).

Joyce’s model is particularly important for my arguments, as it accommodates several analytical perspectives simultaneously. It is concerned with indigenous understandings of representations, considers them vis-à-vis bodily philosophies, and situates them along a spectrum of meaning that was articulated every bit as much in the “grist of everyday time” as it was in “monumental time.” Most significantly, it highlights the “slippages” that inevitably occur across the spectrum of representation, a point especially pertinent to a study such as this, which explores the history of human representation in a variety of mediums for more than two millennia. These slippages, in some ways, become the focus of this book and structure the interplay between social and monumental time, different spaces, and multiple actors. For Nanoglou (2009: 158), tacking between the “enduring, monumental practices” of representation and the “often more fragile, repetitive practices of figurine making” matters, and enables us to understand how objects are “constituted against each other”:

What is really important is to put more weight on the actual process of re-articulating a form (for example, the human body) in a different materiality and the effect this could have on the materialism of social action, that is we should pay more attention to how associations between entities are made and how the particular materiality of each affects the other.

Nanoglou added that by “[i]nhabiting a landscape populated with such varied images, people are forced to embody varied values regarding a proper or viable way to go on.”

Explorations of bodily and ontological understandings of Mesoamerican representations extend beyond the domain of the visual arts. Questions concerning indigenous understandings of the boundaries between likeness and actual identity pervade the work of anthropologists and serve as a reminder of the necessity of reading beyond the confines of our own disciplines. For example, Helena Simonett (2012: 149), in a discussion of indigenous Aztec songs, questioned whether figurative expressions served as metaphor – something “different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable” – or metonymy, in which they substituted for it or instantiated it. She wrote:

Could the expression of one thing in another have been a real connection – that is, a metonymic rather than a metaphoric one? Tomlinson suggests a Nahuatl “grammar of metonymies-collapsing-toward-identities,” in other words, an indigenous view of the world that exalts likeness into identity. “It is not a question of songs being like flowers but simply of songs being flowers (Tomlinson 2007: 75).”²⁵ (Simonett 2012: 149)

Simonett’s query is as relevant to the visual arts as it is to music and literature. I doubt that we have a complete understanding of the complex, and certainly far from static, interrelationships between representation, being, and identity for ancient Mesoamericans, especially those for whom we lack written records. But they are issues worth thinking about.

Discussion

If one looks only at monumental art, a seamless flow of Mesoamerican figural traditions is immediately apparent. But this is misleading. The story is much more interesting and, not surprisingly, much more complicated if expanded to include a broader array of figural representations of varying scale and medium. Only when a variety of objects and data are put into dialogue with each other can we begin to discern the greater trajectory and social significance of human representation in Preclassic Mesoamerica.

Even if we expand our corpus, though, a problem nevertheless remains. Can we ever retrieve the intentions of the artisans, artists, scribes, and rulers who crafted or dictated the content of these myriad forms?²⁶ Sherry Lindquist (2008: 1), in a discussion of medieval art, posed

similar questions that ring as true for the New World as they do for the Old:

If literary theorists can doubt the authority of the author, and ask to what extent we should attribute a text to an individual's intention rather than to the complex matrix of formal and social structures in which the author is situated, how much more complicated is it to investigate intentionality for artistic enterprises requiring the cooperation of several institutions, and hundreds, sometimes thousands, of individuals? At such places, can we really expect to find a coherent program of meaning, or a cohesive aesthetic? If we do, to whom or what should we attribute them? How do we know whether or not the monument successfully fulfilled its intended purpose? And should we not keep in mind that monuments are also shaped by unconscious motivations, long-standing traditions, and amorphous social pressures? That their meanings can be appropriated or shift over time?

Lindquist's answers to these questions are noteworthy. She advocated that we view artistic creations as "crucial realms of non-verbal discourse, as compelling ideological sights and sites where signs and spaces are as potent as words" (Lindquist 2008: 12). She also reminds us that even when objects "gather new meanings over time, they nevertheless do not relinquish the meanings embedded in the circumstances of their production and initial reception" (Lindquist 2008: 13). Art, for Lindquist (2008: 14), shapes a society "even as it is itself shaped by social pressures and imperatives."

Lindquist's queries lurk not far beneath the surface of my exploration of Preclassic sculpture, large and small, in this book. To my mind, Preclassic sculpture and figural representation (defined in an inclusive way) materialized social processes and, even more than that, provided a material means for conceptualizing, negotiating, reaffirming, and critiquing them. Situating figural representation within the rich theoretical debates concerning materiality, agency, and the significance of creative acts necessitates that it be understood as more than a *product* of vaguely defined sociopolitical phenomena: it was fundamental to the developmental trajectory and spread of Mesoamerican civilization. This approach, a fundamentally art historical one, is of critical importance to the larger field of Precolumbian studies that has sometimes in the past – and even occasionally in the present – viewed sculpture and imagery as epiphenomenal, the end result of social forces that are more effectively explored through other more quantitative or scientific means.

This book is not about the origins of art in Mesoamerica, although it does address some of the earliest art forms. It is about how and why representations of the

human body came to be viewed as potent vehicles of expression. It is also, to paraphrase Eric Wolf (1999: 291), about how ideas and power converged through the vehicle of human representation. I hope the book achieves its goal of contributing to a discourse of image theory for Preclassic Mesoamerica through its deliberate focus on human representations that varied in size and medium and were crafted by a diverse array of individuals over the course of centuries. Representations, Nanoglou (2009: 160) argued, have played a key role in "providing a window" into the material conditions of social life around the globe. They are mirrors, albeit distorted ones, of ancient life, and a vital part of "the material conditions that render the air breathable, that make life, always a specific life, possible."

A Word about Chronology

The chronology for Preclassic Mesoamerica has been the topic of increased debate in recent years, spurred by a provocative essay by Takeshi Inomata, Raúl Ortiz, Bárbara Arroyo, and Eugenia Robinson (2014) that, using Bayesian statistical analysis of new and prior radiocarbon assays, argued that portions of the Middle and Late Preclassic sequence needed to be shifted forward in time by approximately 300 years. Their chronological revisions carried implications not only concerning the apogee and denouement of key polities in the region, but also for the relative dating of the corpus of monuments present at many of these sites. Of particular significance was their conclusion that "[m]ultiple lines of evidence indicate that the development of political centralization with well-established rulership occurred roughly contemporaneously in the Southern Maya Area and in the Maya Lowlands after 100 BC, during the period called the Terminal Preclassic or Protoclassic" (Inomata et al. 2014: 403). Inomata et al.'s chronological revisions have been critiqued by some, like Michael Love (2018; also see Mendelsohn 2018 and Rosenswig 2019), who took issue with their methodologies, data, and recommendations that sculpture from the south coast concerned with divine kingship be dated to the "Protoclassic" period, after 100 BC. In Love's opinion, the arguments mustered by Inomata et al. neglected a larger body of archaeological and art historical evidence that demonstrates sustained patterns of political centralization already by 300 BC.

These debates, while more typically voiced in archaeology circles than art historical ones, matter for all Mesoamerican scholars because they are the means through which the contours of time – and the meaningful segments within it that we use to secure in place objects and

spaces – are established. In truth, chronologies are rarely stable, especially when formulated via intersecting methods and data points – stratigraphic levels, ceramic seriations, radiocarbon assays, etc. – that are, through the processes of ongoing excavation and scholarly investigation, continually revised. Chronologies “should be under constant revision,” Love (2018: 260) urged, and discussions like the one generated by Inomata et al.’s essay always welcome.

These debates underscore the challenges involved in attempting to anchor sculpture in any temporal continuum. The relationship between ceramic chronologies and the relative dating of sculpture is imprecise, complicated at times by a lack of primary archaeological context or, even when good contextual data exist, the inescapable fact that sculpture was in the ancient past – and continues to be, in the modern present – mobile, an often-rootless form, prone to being moved, repositioned, or reoriented. These more pragmatic concerns are exacerbated by another issue: sculpture and ceramics respond to very different social forces, and it is naïve to assume that the same social transformations that ceramic changes measure would be reflected back, like a mirror image, in the form of sculptural transformations.

For these reasons, seriating Preclassic sculpture into a precise chronological framework is best done somewhat conservatively, especially for sculpture that lacks any form of calendrical inscription that might suggest a more precise date of manufacture. Because of this, I utilize throughout this book broad categories of time, such as “Early Preclassic” (2000–1000 BC), “Middle Preclassic” (1000–300 BC), or “Late Preclassic” (300 BC–AD 250); all phase assignments reflect calibrated dates unless otherwise noted. One day, perhaps sooner than later, we may have the methods and data to enable us to fine-tune the temporal classifications of sculpture and speak of stylistic and iconographic achievements that were particular to the early or late facets of any particular period. At this point, however, I do not feel comfortable allocating more finely tuned temporal assignments to the majority of Preclassic sculptures, and view attempts to do

otherwise as premature, problematic, and, most importantly, unconvincing.²⁷

In this book, I have found it more useful to step back and look at larger, more gradual trends and “big pictures.” This method enables the sculpture to be a protagonist in its own story. It also recognizes that the story unfolded in many places, at the hands of innumerable actors, and at a pace that does not necessarily lend itself to precise chronological assignment. I worry much less about concrete dating than patterns of representation and their changing nature across large segments of time. I also view the changing patterns of figural representation as a dynamic in and of itself: I do not think that sculpture merely reacted to social forces. I continue to believe that sculpture quite literally gave form to some of the ideas that would guide Mesoamerican understandings of what it meant to be human. That said, I do hope that the arguments laid out in this book will, one day, for better or worse, be critiqued because more refined chronologies have been developed. But I also suspect that there will always be cases where absolute dates do a disservice to understanding the ways in which categories of representation waxed and waned in Preclassic Mesoamerica. Artists, scribes, and the rulers who employed them must have made representational choices in as many different ways as there are cities, objects, and makers, some of which endured and others of which faded away, only to be reformulated in a different place and at a later date. We can never get at the complete picture, much less every point in time and each independent decision that contributed to the general trends that are now, in hindsight, discernible. In fact, we should, as we contemplate refined chronologies, always pay heed to how the sculpture and representational choices at different sites and in different regions diverge or even contradict each other. It is only when we recognize these differences and begin to understand the myriad ways in which representational choices inspired, lent physical expression to, and reacted to the dynamic social forces of the Preclassic period that we can even begin to understand more fully this period in all of its complexity.

Monumental Sculpture and the Human Form during the Early and Middle Preclassic Periods

My goal in this chapter is to summarize and discuss the ways in which the human form was rendered and displayed at a monumental scale during the Early and Middle Preclassic periods, a span of time corresponding to roughly 2000–300 BC. Because I am arguing that the production of the human form at a monumental scale and in durable form became, by the Late Preclassic period (300 BC–AD 250), an elite prerogative, the history of representation leading up to this moment in time is important to establish. I do not, however, offer a comprehensive survey of Early and Middle Preclassic sculpture in this chapter. Such a task lies well beyond the confines of this book and is also, in my opinion, unnecessary, since a number of valuable studies exploring this history exist.¹ What I focus on, instead, are the sculptural innovations that transpired during this era, which included the development of complex narrative compositions, many of which incorporated references to the larger world of objects and people. Norms for articulating what it meant to be a human were also codified, as were certain kinds of subject matter and a preference for select types of individuals.

Most studies of Early and Middle Preclassic sculpture tend to privilege the Gulf Coast region, the locus of many of the most vibrant traditions of early sculpture. I readily acknowledge the extraordinary developments that transpired there, but also give due consideration to sculpture from other areas of Mesoamerica that were fully participatory in broader trends of Preclassic experimentation. Two other parameters are worthy of note. For one, I focus on “monumental” sculpture, or sculpture that appears to have been designed for use in public spaces where relative scale and visual accessibility were particularly salient criteria. The term “monumental,” however, connotes far more than size. It suggests a concern with specialized knowledge, labor, and the mobilization of

resources (including locating and transporting stone), as well as “the longer-term impact of spiritual awe” and social power that such objects generate (Rosenswig and Burger 2012: 3). The “power” of monumental structures and objects is derived to some degree from the fact that the sheer size and/or elaboration of such objects far exceed any purely functional requirements (Trigger 1990: 119). In fact, the Latin verb *moneo*, from which the Latin noun *monumentum* derives, means “to bring to the notice of,” advise, or warn, and is infused with a concern for commemoration and memory.²

Mesoamerica is a world away from Rome, of course. But the word “monumental” is fundamental to the way we, who work in the New World, describe the sculpture and architecture of ancient cities. I do not take issue with this: Preclassic sculpture was surely intended to bring notice to itself and to the ideas it visualized. It surely activated the memories of viewers, and many of its formal innovations seem designed to engage audiences, to inspire contemplation, and to propel memories and ideals into the future. Permanence, stability, and durability were central to its messaging, as was an emphasis on conspicuous expenditure.

In Mesoamerica, stone became the preferred medium through which many of these meanings were expressed. Stone was a valuable resource whose access and distribution appear to have been controlled by people of high social rank beginning in the Early Preclassic period (Cyphers 1999, 2014).³ Ann Cyphers (2014: 1015) argued that, beyond the material in and of itself, Early Preclassic elites controlled specific technologies of stone carving.⁴ But stoneworking at a monumental scale was linked to more than economic concerns: it also required knowledge of where the “stony places” were, or where high-quality stone amenable to carving could be found, as well as knowledge of how to work the pieces so they served effectively in the transmission of symbols, forms, and ideas. Stone became a vital medium through which social hierarchy was communicated and sustained, and its inherent tenacity made it a logical medium through which statements of monumental time were asserted (Carmean et al. 2011: 144, following Ricoeur 1985: 110).

This chapter becomes a foil of sorts for the ensuing one, where I pivot to discuss how many of the same conceptual issues concerning human representation were being pursued, contemporaneously, in mediums that were neither stone nor monumental nor intended to serve the same audiences or purposes. These modes of representation, in spite of their different domains of materiality

and expression, were nevertheless constantly in dialogue with each other. Yet understanding each domain, on its own terms, is necessary. Their boundaries, every bit as much as their points of intersection, are central to the complex story of human representation in Preclassic Mesoamerica.

Context surely mattered for the monumental sculpture of the Early and Middle Preclassic periods, yet ascertaining those contexts is not always possible. The very durability of monuments often meant that they far outlived their original purposes, and many were put to use by later peoples (Clark et al. 2010: 5). When we *can* say something about primary contexts, it is clear that Preclassic sculpture played a fundamental role in constructing the world in which people moved and acted. Monuments conceptualized in tandem with the architectural spaces of political centers, for example, functioned as key nodes within the “networks of intentionality” crafted by ruling elites (Gell 1998: 6). But we should be wary of limiting the monuments and their contexts to “a single practice” (Robb 2009: 179). Love (1999a: 127) warned against the dangers of a reductive approach and urged Mesoamerican scholars to employ Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977: 91) ideas concerning the “world of objects,” to carefully consider the complex realm of social action in which objects functioned in the ancient past. Love argued that Bourdieu’s fundamental premise – that the world of objects situates and guides social action of all sorts – provides “a tremendously important avenue for analyzing ideology, social practice, and material culture” across the social spectrum.

The many interrelationships between people and objects are especially important to recognize when the objects themselves take the form of human likenesses, when they mirror human visages and bodies. It was during the Preclassic period when, in Mesoamerica, the first recursive relationships were forged between human actors, their actions, their paths, and durable, three-dimensional, life-size human representations. My goal is to get at these recursive relationships and to elucidate how representations of the human form became central to the ways in which Preclassic Mesoamericans ordered their world.

The questions with which this chapter and the ensuing ones engage are many and at times diffuse, yet each is anchored to the topic of human representation: What was the significance of portraying the human body in monumental and durable form? What do such objects reveal about whose bodies were memorialized? What role did Early and Middle Preclassic sculptures play in the development of norms of representation for the human body? What formal innovations emerged from this milieu of

experimentation? What do the boundaries between three-dimensional, volumetric representation and more two-dimensional, increasingly narrative frameworks reveal about the changing goals and messages of Preclassic human representation?

Each of these queries matters, even if neat answers cannot always be supplied. The Early and Middle Preclassic periods gave rise to remarkable artistic experimentation, which was generated and sustained in great part through burgeoning networks of exchange and communication across Mesoamerica. Even if we narrow our focus to questions of human representation alone, the story is inevitably untidy and, because of this, fascinating.

The birth of monumental sculpture in Early Preclassic Mesoamerica was not an isolated phenomenon. It was linked to other social shifts of the time, not the least of which was the establishment of the first permanent villages and, eventually, increasingly urban settlements. Sculpture, as an idea, took root unevenly across Mesoamerica, but it moved as an idea along many of the same paths of exchange as ceramics, for instance, whose technology, forms, styles, and motifs were also widely shared. So, too, trade in obsidian and the spread of cultivars characterized the early history of Mesoamerica, as did the procurement of exotic materials from diverse regions (Stark 2000: 34–35). Keeping such diverse spheres of exchange in mind is important, for it reminds us that sculpture was a part of social networks that involved an endless and shifting array of people, things, and places both local and foreign.

The Early Preclassic Period (2000–1000 BC) along the Gulf Coast

An Early Preclassic tradition of monumental sculpture representing the human form is well illustrated at the site of San Lorenzo, in Veracruz, Mexico, where one finds massive heads carved from boulders and altar/thrones that display a variety of humans (Figs. 1.1 and 2.1) (Coe and Diehl 1980; Cyphers 2004; Stirling 1955). The eclectic corpus also includes zoomorphic forms – jaguars, avians, even insects – as well as representations of supernatural beings and elegantly carved functional objects like water troughs or other forms whose function is not always obvious.⁵ In spite of this variety, the resounding majority of sculptures from San Lorenzo portrays human beings or anthropomorphic individuals, a point first made by Beatriz de la Fuente, whose title for her volume on Olmec sculpture, *Los Hombres de Piedra*, sums this up well (de la Fuente 1973, 1977, 1996; also see Tate 2012: 112–113). Beatriz De la Fuente (1996: 42) estimated that close to

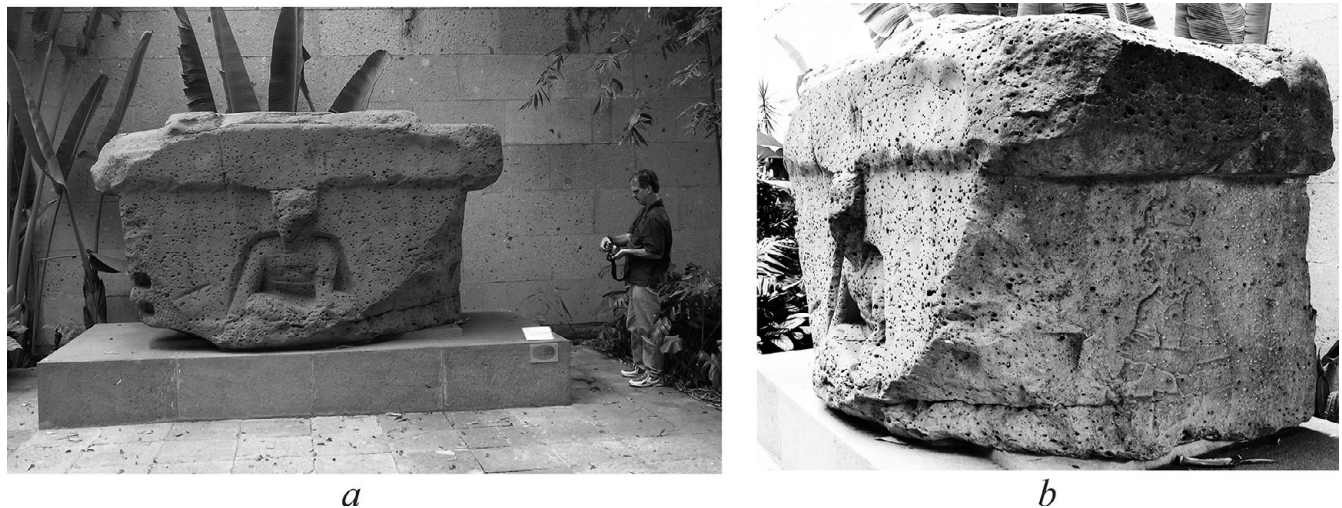


Figure 2.1 San Lorenzo Monument 14: (a) frontal view; (b) oblique view. Photos by author

of Olmec sculptures represent “purely human figures.” Her point is an important one that, in spite of its clarity, may not have been accorded adequate attention in broader, global histories of art. Classics scholar Mary Beard (2018: 34) once quipped that Greek art means *bodies*. It does not mean landscapes, and it does not mean still lifes. The same can be said readily about Olmec art, with its impressive focus on the human form, but also about the general arc of Mesoamerican art in many regions. The history of Mesoamerican art begins, as de la Fuente cogently articulated, with *bodies*.

De la Fuente also understood that this emphasis on bodies in Mesoamerica was never a simple, straightforward exercise in anatomical verisimilitude. She was quick to observe, for example, that it is exceedingly difficult to ascertain, in many cases, whether or not the individuals portrayed in Olmec art are fully human. Supernatural beings conceived in anthropomorphic form were also carved, as were others that combine human, divine, and even zoomorphic features. Her solution to this vexing problem was quite brilliant. De la Fuente (1977: 217) argued, persuasively, that the frontiers between the human and divine converged in the human form; in Olmec art, the human body was the bridge between the supernatural and natural worlds.⁶ In the discussion below, I follow de la Fuente’s lead, convinced that our modern twenty-first-century preoccupation with distinguishing between the human and the divine differs considerably from the concerns of early Mesoamericans. Anthropomorphically rendered bodies mattered in ancient Mesoamerica even when – or perhaps especially when – they straddled an ontological frontier between the human and the divine.

The precise dating of early Gulf Coast sculptural traditions is a subject of ongoing debate. Michael Coe and

Richard Diehl (1980) argued that most of the sculptures at San Lorenzo date to the apogee of the site, which they placed between 1300 and 1000 BC (uncalibrated), in spite of the fact that they documented earlier and later occupation layers. Others, like John Graham (1989) and Norman Hammond (1988), maintained that the monuments post-date San Lorenzo’s climax and more likely pertain to the Middle Preclassic period. My colleagues and I (Clark et al. 2010) speculated that several centuries of sculptural production might be represented at San Lorenzo, with some of the monuments pertaining to the Early Preclassic and others to later Middle Preclassic occupations at the site. Most recently, Cyphers (2014), who directs ongoing excavations at San Lorenzo, described the period of 1400–900 BC as that of the center’s “maximum splendor” and argued that secure archaeological contexts for a significant percentage of the sculptures support their Early Preclassic dating and provide “a stylistic baseline for inferring a similar dating for the remainder.”⁷ Following Cyphers, I include the San Lorenzo sculptural corpus in my discussion of the Early Preclassic period.

Chronological debates aside, one can discern from these sculptures that artists were formulating innovative solutions to the issues and challenges of representation. As Coe (1965b), de la Fuente (1973, 1981, 1984, 1996), and Carolyn Tate (1995) described, most Olmec-style sculptures are conceived in the round, often in forms that retain a close relationship to the original boulders from which they were carved or that incorporate subtly modeled features that capitalize on the expressive potential of the rock’s volume. Boulder sculptures, asserted Graham (1981a: 169; also see Graham and Benson 2005), deliberately preserve, and even celebrate, the natural contours

of the original rocks; their very “definition rests upon the recognition of the original volume and contours of the boulder.” Yet, as Graham also recognized, there is a stark tension in many early sculptures between volume, the natural contours of the rocks, and their prepared surfaces; it is as if artists were experimenting with compositions that celebrated the nature of the rocks in and of themselves but also capitalized on their potential to provide planar surfaces ripe for shallow, detailed carving. San Lorenzo Monument 14 (Fig. 2.1) models these tensions: a massive three-dimensionally rendered protagonist projects from a niche carved into the front of the volumetric altar/throne while along the side of the monument appears the profile of a secondary figure rendered in low relief.⁸ Sculptures like Monument 14 attest to the early development of canons of representation designed to highlight status differences between individuals that would be retained throughout the history of Mesoamerican art. In this case, the composition subtly clues viewers in on the relative significance of the frontally portrayed and three-dimensionally rendered individual, centered on the front of the throne, compared to the secondary individual carved in shallow profile on the side of the monument.

A similar oscillation between two- and three-dimensionality characterizes the monumental heads of

San Lorenzo, which lend their weight – quite literally, given the fact that they weigh many tons each – to representation of the human form. The heads, which may represent historical rulers or legendary ancestors,⁹ ushered in a sculptural format, focused on disembodied heads, which would endure for centuries in Mesoamerica.¹⁰ The volumetric contours of the colossal heads stand in sharp contrast with details carved in low relief in the headdresses, each of which contains idiosyncratic components (Coe 1977: 186). Marc Zender (2014: 64–65), following David Kelley’s (1982) observation that throughout Mesoamerica there is a recurring association between heads and nominal devices, suggested that the unique headdress of San Lorenzo Monument 2 (Fig. 2.2a), which displays three macaw heads, signified the name of the individual portrayed. While the specific function of these details may forever escape us, one thing is certain: low relief carving was employed to effectively communicate aspects of identity that were seamlessly integrated into a design moored in the sheer volume and mass of the original boulder. These very tensions between two- and three-dimensionality, already palpable in Early Preclassic sculpture, laid the groundwork for many of the formal and conceptual transformations of later sculpture, including a growing interest in planar



a



b

Figure 2.2 Olmec colossal heads: (a) San Lorenzo Monument 2; (b) La Venta Monument 3. Panel (a) by Michael Love; panel (b) by author

surfaces suitable for conveying detailed information that invited close inspection.

Other details lend an animate quality to the sculptures. The subtle modeling of the lips of the figures is remarkable given the fact that the basalt boulders were carved without the aid of metal tools and through the slow and laborious abrasion of the stone.¹¹ By the Middle Preclassic, an interest in animating similar colossal heads at La Venta became quite pronounced. González Lauck (2010: 134, fig. 6.2) remarked on the expressivity conveyed by the parted lips of La Venta Monuments 2, 3 (Fig. 2.2b), and 4. She suggested that this trio, vigilantly surveying the periphery of that community, may have been rendered as if “speaking,” embodiments of the voices of authority.¹² An association between the authority of rulers and vocalizations is well documented throughout Mesoamerica (Fields 1989: 75), and monuments like these indicate the Preclassic origins of such notions.

The artists of San Lorenzo were equally concerned with representing the complete human body in the round, as San Lorenzo Monument 11 demonstrates

(Fig. 2.3a). The body of the presumably human figure – a point difficult to confirm given the missing head – is markedly volumetric, and there is subtle modeling across the chest. Secondary sites within the San Lorenzo sphere embraced similar sculptural expressions. Estero Rabón Monuments 4 and 6 are equally concerned with the volumetric representation of the human body (Cyphers 2004: figs. 178, 181). Interestingly, the scale of all three is relatively consistent and in keeping with that of actual human beings. Whether the objects were situated at a primary or secondary center seems not to have affected their size. The heights of the sculptures (not including heads, which are missing on all three) are 63 cm (Estero Rabón Monument 4), 68 cm (San Lorenzo Monument 11), and 73 cm (Estero Rabón Monument 6). John Clark (1994: 266) suggested that objects like these portray lesser nobles or princes and gave physical form to the actors that comprised various sociopolitical networks throughout the region. In a similar vein, Cyphers and Judith Zurita-Noguera (2006; also see Cyphers 2014) argued that the presence of such monuments at secondary centers points to the role of sculpture in communicating

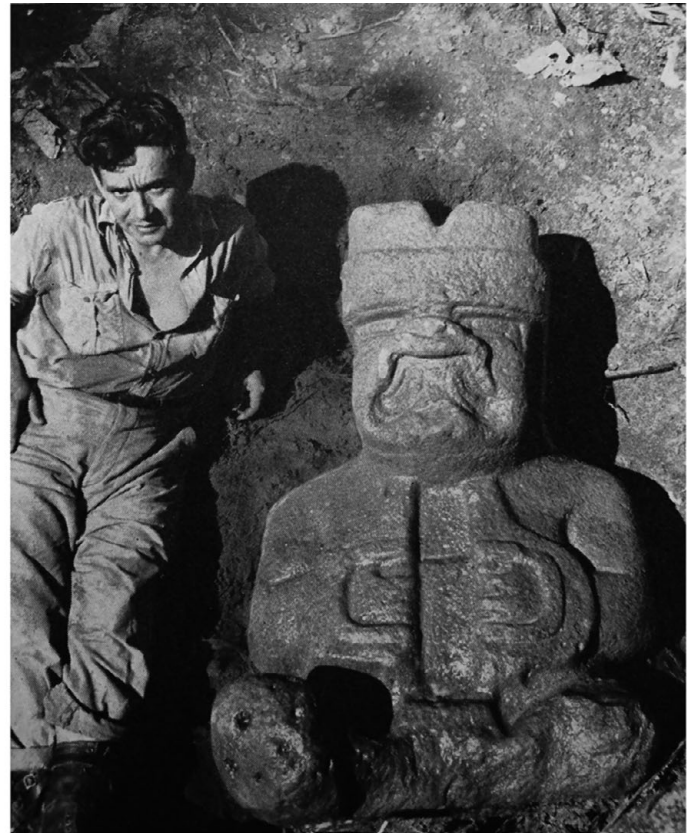
*a**b*

Figure 2.3 San Lorenzo sculpture: (a) Monument 11; (b) Monument 10. Photos by Richard Stewart, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives

messages of social integration.¹³ It is quite likely that sculpture at San Lorenzo served multiple purposes, sometimes articulating the relative rank of polities while at others symbolizing the integrative networks necessary for governing San Lorenzo's realm effectively.

The seated postures of the individuals on San Lorenzo Monument 11 and Estero Rabón Monuments 4 and 6 were not viewed as appropriate only for humans. The zoomorphic facial features of the figure on San Lorenzo Monument 10 (Fig. 2.3b) remind us that supernatural creatures likewise possessed anthropomorphic bodies, assumed similar postures, and were rendered at a similar scale (in this case 119 cm in height, including the head). Monument 10 forces us to contend with the complicated relationships between human bodies, divine bodies, and shared canons of anthropomorphic representation that were being formulated during the Early Preclassic. As this chapter and the next will make clear, such matters were being addressed not only at a monumental scale or through the medium of stone; smaller objects of stone and clay reveal a similar concern with using anthropomorphic forms to articulate a spectrum of identity from the human to the divine.

Other types of individuals appear within the corpus of San Lorenzo sculpture, as in the case of the diminutive characters on San Lorenzo Monument 18 and Loma del Zapote Monument 2 (Cyphers 2004: figs. 36–38, 154, 155).¹⁴ Their proportions and overall sensibility differ markedly from the individual represented by San Lorenzo Monument 34, which Coe and Diehl (1980: 343: figs. 465–468) identified as a ballplayer based on the figure's posture and regalia (Fig. 2.4). At the very least, sculptures such as these point to a desire to express a range of characters. In the case of Monument 34, most remarkable is a design that incorporated tenoned arms (now lost, and perhaps carved from less durable materials), which may have enabled the appendages to assume more than one position (Coe and Diehl 1980: 343). Monument 34's capacity for flexibility, according to de la Fuente (1984: 146), runs counter to most Olmec art, which emphasizes states of weighty repose.¹⁵

San Lorenzo Monument 112 (Fig. 2.5) demonstrates that individuals could also be rendered in shallow relief across the surface of a large boulder that, although worked into an oval shape, retains aspects of its natural contours as well as the imperfections of its surface (Cyphers 2004: 190). In fact, although it is true that the Early Preclassic corpus of monuments at San Lorenzo privileges volumetrically conceived human forms, this generalization does not do justice to the experiments with two-dimensional representation that were also transpiring in this early period. In the case of Monument 112, the



Figure 2.4 San Lorenzo Monument 34. Photo by Michael Love

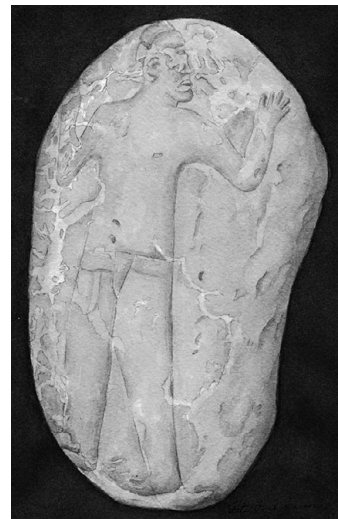


Figure 2.5 San Lorenzo Monument 112. Watercolor by Rita Ford Guernsey after Cyphers (2004: fig. 127)

solitary figure's body is portrayed frontally while the face is rendered in profile, in shallow relief. The stance of the individual, legs apart and arms raised in the air, is quite static. The position anticipates later conventions, such as those used by Classic Maya scribes, in which bodies were rendered frontally while heads were executed in profile, turned sharply at a 90-degree angle. Gillespie (2008a: 108) argued that, for the Classic Maya, this somewhat artificial positioning of bodies and heads was done for the viewer's sake; it utilized, as Kubler (1984: 111) phrased it, "an organically impossible but conceptually clear representation of body motions." San Lorenzo Monument 112 confirms that these conventions pre-date the Classic Maya by centuries and were born from an interest in both clear representation and a sensitivity to the boulder's materiality.

A series of monuments from Loma del Zapote, a secondary site within the political orbit of San Lorenzo, was found in an undisturbed context that affords unusual insight into questions of display in the ancient past.

Monuments 7–10 – a quartet of two felines and two finely garbed individuals – suggest a carefully curated assemblage (Fig. 2.6). Cyphers (1999: 170) argued that their arrangement hints at some long forgotten historical event or mythic story that carried significance for this subsidiary polity. Their scale, quite diminutive when compared with the monumental heads or altars, suggests a concern with portability and raises the possibility that the configuration in which they were found was only one of many other possibilities.



Figure 2.6 Loma del Zapote Monuments 7–9, reconstruction of original tableaux, *The Olmec: Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico* exhibition, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2010. Photo by Michael Love

A multi-piece tableau with interchangeable components, like that from Loma del Zapote, was not the only format in which narrative experimentation took place. San Lorenzo Monument 107 (Fig. 2.7a) portrays an encounter between a fully three-dimensional jaguar and a human, rendered two-dimensionally, whose body descends down the vertical shaft of the monument. Carved of one piece of stone, the sculpture is remarkable for its development of a format that successfully alludes to some narrative, action, or series of events, but does so via this unusual union of a feline, conceived almost fully in the round, with a human carved in relief. Adjacent to the descending human, as if framing its body, are undulating forms that continue, even more deeply carved, onto the back of the vertical shaft (Cyphers 2004: fig. 118). The contrasts within a single monument are striking: while the arm of the feline, for example, is fully three-dimensional, that of the human appears in relief, still secured to its stony matrix. The undulating pattern of stone encapsulating the human body on Monument 107 compares to that of San Lorenzo Monument 105 (Cyphers 2004: fig. 115), in which a similarly swirling matrix of stone constitutes one-half of an anthropomorphic head bearing rectangular eyes that hint at a supernatural identity. The indissoluble, organic

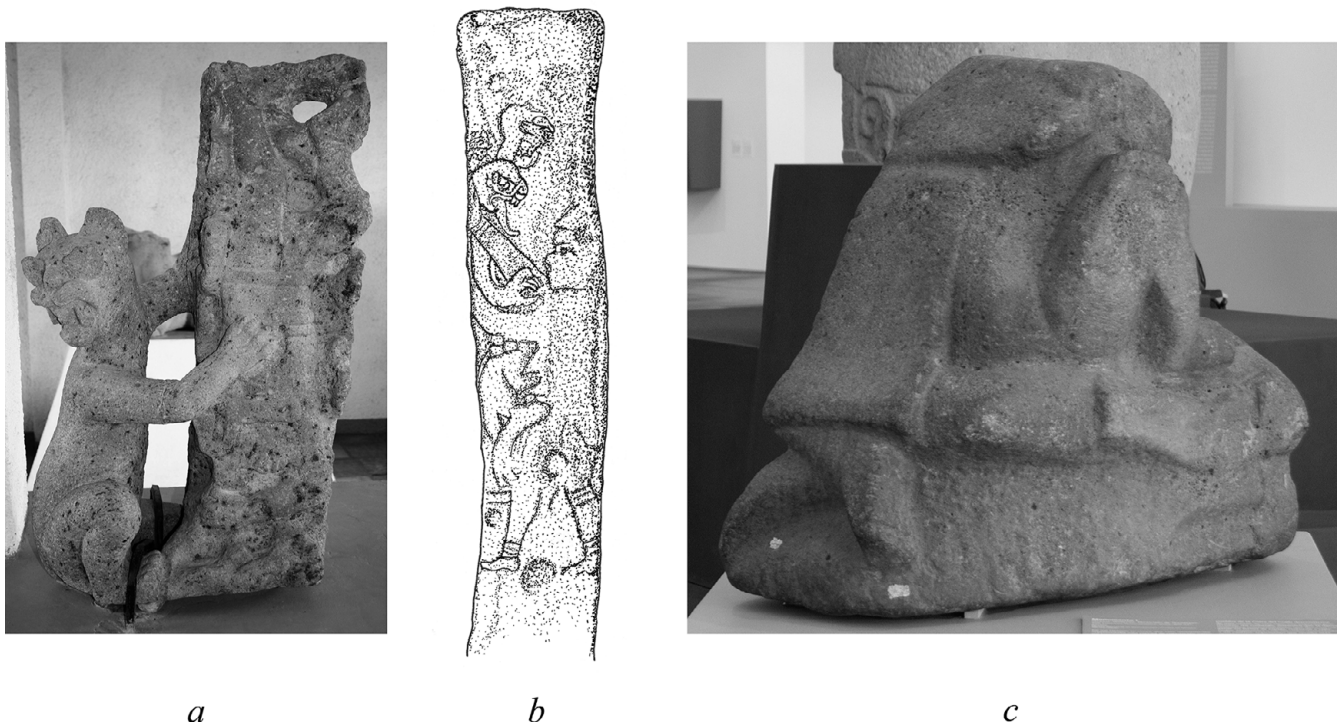


Figure 2.7 Monuments from San Lorenzo and environs: (a) San Lorenzo Monument 107; (b) San Lorenzo Monument 56; (c) Tenochtitlán Monument 1 with back and haunches of the dominant individual visible as well as a foot, at lower left, of the supine individual. Photo (a) courtesy of Carl Wendt; drawing (b) by author after Cyphers (2004: fig. 68); photo (c) by Michael Love

relationship between stone and bodily forms is explicit in these two sculptures.

San Lorenzo Monument 56 (Fig. 2.7b), a tall, narrow sculpture, provides yet another example of narrative experimentation, this time accomplished through an intricate composition rendered solely in shallow relief. The scene portrays an encounter between a human and a zoomorphic creature. A few poorly preserved details continue on to the sides; the primary visual focus was very clearly the front and its narrative field. Coe and Diehl (1980: 363) compared Monument 56 to La Venta Monument 63, whose imagery likewise wraps slightly onto the gently rounded sides of the monument but, nevertheless, seems designed for frontal viewership.¹⁶ Cyphers (2004: 121) vacillated, understandably, over whether Monument 56 should be classified as a column or a stela. Stelae make a consistent appearance in the archaeological record beginning in the Middle Preclassic period, although earlier examples of columnar forms – like San Lorenzo Monument 41, also carved in low relief (Coe and Diehl 1980: figs. 477, 478) – point to Early Preclassic antecedents for these innovations. The stela-like contours of San Lorenzo Monument 56 may suggest a late placement for it within the San Lorenzo chronology. Its narrative composition, orchestrated gracefully across the face of the stone, also anticipates a Middle Preclassic trend for increasingly complex compositions.

A monument from Tenochtitlán, a large village to the north of San Lorenzo, is equally noteworthy. Tenochtitlán Monument 1 portrays an encounter between two humans, one of whom straddles a second, supine figure (Fig. 2.7c) (Coe and Diehl 1980: fig. 499; Cyphers 2004: fig. 148). Traditional interpretation holds that the dominant figure represents a ballplayer and the supine individual a female, an argument Cyphers (2004: 219–221) found unconvincing. Rather than weigh in on questions of meaning, I only note that this sculpture is unusual within the greater San Lorenzo region for its focus on an ostensibly charged confrontation between two humans carved (for the most part) in three dimensions. On San Lorenzo Monument 107 (Fig. 2.7a) the confrontation is between a human and a jaguar, and the human, while quite volumetric, is nevertheless still anchored to a vertical shaft.¹⁷ On San Lorenzo Monument 56 (Fig. 2.7b), the confrontation between the human and the zoomorph plays out in shallow relief across the surface of the column. The only other sculptures carved in the round that accommodate more than one human body are the fragmentary San Lorenzo Monument 12 and Estero Rabón Monument 3, both of which portray a seated individual holding what appears to be a child (Cyphers 2004: figs. 26, 177). While San Lorenzo Monument 12 and Estero Rabón Monument 3 allude to some

form of interaction between two humans, it is hardly the intense confrontation featured on Tenochtitlán Monument 1. The same might also be said of the freestanding figures within the Loma del Zapote tableau (Fig. 2.6). There is no direct visual engagement between the anthropomorphic figures, whose attention is riveted on the felines in front of them. In this sense, Tenochtitlán Monument 1, with its emphasis on a dramatic confrontation between two individuals, is unusual, and finds its closest analogues with sculptures such as San Lorenzo Monument 107 or Loma del Zapote Monument 3 (Cyphers 2004: figs. 156–158), which feature equally intense confrontations between humans and animals or zoomorphic beings. This evidence is provocative: interactions between figures, whether animated or passive, whether rendered two- or three-dimensionally or in some combination thereof, always include at least one human or anthropomorph, who is then paired with either another anthropomorph or with an animal. No purely animal-on-animal encounters are documented within the sculptural corpus as far as I am aware; a human presence seems requisite.¹⁸

Early Preclassic sculpture in the Gulf Coast region was nothing short of precocious. It evidences an extraordinary range of compositional variation that embraced both the volumetric capacities of large boulders but also the expressive potential of smoothed, planar surfaces. Narrative – in the sense of storytelling, or the expression of a sequence of events or actions – was also explored in a variety of formats, from multi-piece tableaux to singular stones carved to incorporate multiple actors in a unified composition. These feats are important to recognize, as they indicate a rather sophisticated understanding of the illustrative potential of stone sculpture, in all its varieties, sizes, and shapes. So, too, the emphasis on representation of the human form is remarkable. Although there is, indeed, a significant array of non-human characters in the corpus of art from San Lorenzo, the human body constitutes the most potent and recurring theme.

It may seem surprising to modern viewers that these carefully carved human forms became the locus of systematic destruction or ritual mutilation. A quick perusal of monuments at San Lorenzo reveals pockmarked colossal heads and sculptures that have been decapitated, broken, or effaced in other ways. In a 1940 publication, Matthew Stirling (1940: 334) commented on the mutilated monuments he had encountered in the Olmec region, exclaiming, “This could not possibly have happened by accident.”¹⁹ Such observations eventually inspired David Grove (1981: 49) to posit that acts of destruction were not indicative of revolution or iconoclasm – “negative acts” per Grove – but evidence of symbolic behavior related to calendric or ritual cycles,

changes in rulership, or the deaths of leaders. Building off of Grove's suggestions, John Clark (1997: 221) argued that acts of mutilation served to neutralize the power of certain types of Early Preclassic sculpture. He noted that San Lorenzo monuments portraying elite individuals were the "principal targets of breakage, while images of supernaturals, presumably also of great power, were left relatively untouched." Clark's observations highlight the fact that the human form was the focus not only of sculptors who carved the monuments but also of the individuals who defaced them. I return to these ideas in Chapter 5, where I place acts of monument mutilation in dialogue with other acts of breakage that characterize a much wider cross-section of material culture throughout the history of Mesoamerica. But a targeted focus on defacing representations of humans is important to establish since it alludes, almost paradoxically, to their inherent power and the explicit relationship in Mesoamerica between generative and destructive acts.

Before leaving the Gulf Coast, mention should be made of another far rarer material to preserve in the archaeological record, in this case, wood, which was also employed to creative advantage to create human representations during the Early Preclassic period. At El Manatí, located 17 km southeast of San Lorenzo in the lower basin of the Coatzacoalcos River, more than three dozen figural busts were discovered in a spring, where they were remarkably well preserved due to the anaerobic environment (Ortiz and Rodríguez 1989, 1994, 1997, 1999; Ortiz et al. 1997). El Manatí appears to have been a ritual destination rather than a formal settlement, which likely attracted pilgrims from San Lorenzo and other communities in the vicinity, perhaps to celebrate seasonal or calendrical cycles (Rodríguez and Ortiz 1997: 92; also see Ortiz and Rodríguez 2000). The busts display features found repeatedly in Olmec art: disproportionately elongated, hairless heads with narrow eyes, sometimes open and at others apparently closed, and thick downturned lips. The busts lack arms, which are indicated only through short stubs that extend from the shoulders; in that sense, they bear some similarity to Early Preclassic clay figurines found elsewhere, which likewise render arms only as rounded stubs (Lesure 1997: 234–235; Tate 2012: 83–84). Although they are roughly life-size and each possesses unique, naturalistic features, gender appears not to have been emphasized. Several of the wooden busts were wrapped in plant material, akin to mortuary bundles, and accompanied by materials including a wooden baton, chunks of hematite, and disarticulated infant bones (Ortiz and Rodríguez 2000: 83). Rodríguez and Ortiz (1997: 85) noted that three of the busts were positioned in a semicircle around an infant

cranium, which, like stone sculpture groupings, may have carried particular meaning.²⁰

Early Preclassic Sculpture from the Pacific Slope

A comparatively spotty corpus of Early Preclassic sculpture exists for the Pacific slope.²¹ Because the dating for most of the monuments is based primarily on comparison to Early Preclassic Olmec monuments from the Gulf Coast rather than on adequate contextual data, a point of clarification about stylistic classifications is in order. Many scholars have pointed out that the term "Olmec" falsely implies a point of origin for the stylistic (and iconographic) traits evident in the Gulf Coast Olmec "heartland."²² In reality, numerous polities in various regions throughout Mesoamerica were participating in Preclassic spheres of exchange. My use of the term "Olmec" follows that of others and distinguishes between an Olmec people, who lived in the Gulf Coast region at sites such as San Lorenzo and La Venta, and an Olmec style, not explicitly attributable to Olmec people but instead the result of multidirectional trajectories of creative exchange across Preclassic Mesoamerica that involved peoples of diverse "biological, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds" (Clark and Pye 2000: 218; Pye and Clark 2000: 12).

Examples of monumental sculpture assigned to the Early Preclassic Pacific Coast come from the sites of Buena Vista, Alvaro Obregón, and Ojo de Agua, all in the Mazatán region of Chiapas, Mexico (Clark and Hodgson 2007–2008; Clark and Pye 2000; Lowe 1994). The Buena Vista monument (Fig. 2.8a) was conceived in the round and blends a naturalistic human body and face with an accentuated or slightly everted upper lip

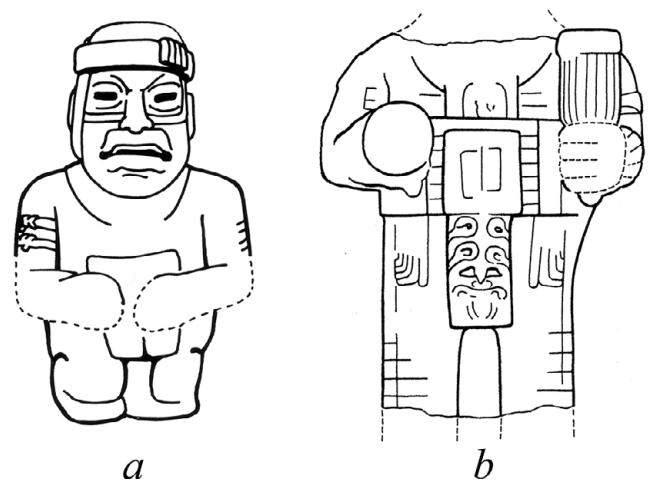


Figure 2.8 Preclassic monuments from Chiapas, Mexico: (a) Buena Vista sculpture; (b) Alvaro Obregón sculpture. Drawings courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation

that lends a snarling quality to the figure comparable to that of San Lorenzo Monument 52 (Coe and Diehl 1980: fig. 494) or Estero Rabón Monument 5 (Cyphers 2004: fig. 179). In spite of this feature, the overarching sensibility of the diminutive (90 cm tall) Buena Vista monument is that of a human.²³ The fragmentary sculpture from Alvaro Obregón (Fig. 2.8b) (de la Fuente 1994; Lowe 1994) is remarkable for its similarities to Monument 19 of Laguna de los Cerros, Veracruz, whose Early Preclassic date was established through Gillespie's (2000a: 111) archaeological investigations.²⁴ Although the Buena Vista and Alvaro Obregón monuments lack secure archaeological contexts, their stylistic relationship to early sculptures from the Olmec heartland led scholars (Clark and Hodgson 2007–2008; Clark and Pye 2000: 226–227; Lowe 1994) to place them provisionally in the Cuadros phase, 1300–1200 BC, near the end of the Early Preclassic period.

Ties to the Gulf Coast region were not limited to monumental sculpture or spheres of elite communication and exchange at this time. During the Cuadros phase, at the Pacific Coast regional center of Cantón Corralito, figurines and ceramics reveal increasingly Olmec sensibilities (Cheetham 2009; Clark and Pye 2000: 232–234; 2011). Similar dynamics also characterize Cuadros-phase assemblages at the site of Izapa, just to the east of the Mazatán region. Yet clearly defining the extent and impact of an Olmec interaction sphere throughout the Pacific Coast region is challenging: ceramic assemblages from polities across the border in Guatemala bear only generic resemblances to those from the Gulf Coast (Bove 1989: 5, 2005; Demarest 1989: 315–316; Love 1999b).

The site of Ojo de Agua, also in the Mazatán region of Chiapas, is interesting to consider in this light. By the Jocotal phase (1200–1000 BC), and following the decline of Cantón Corralito, Ojo de Agua attained the status of regional capital.²⁵ Although its archaeological assemblage points to waning Gulf Coast influence and the forging of new trade connections with Central Mexico (Clark and Pye 2011: 35), its limited sculptural corpus suggests otherwise.²⁶ The 66-cm-tall Monument 1 (Fig. 2.9), made from local andesite (Lowe 1994: fig. 7.7; Navarrete 1974), possesses “flame” eyebrows and a swept-back cranium that compare to the Río Pesquero statuette (Benson 1971) and San Martín Pajapán Monument 1 (de la Fuente 1981: fig. 11). These supernatural attributes contrast with Ojo de Agua Monument 1's distinctly human arms, legs, and overall form, which is partially obscured by a large “sandwich board” pectoral that reiterates a distinctly Olmec iconography: the small visage at the top possesses “flame” eyebrows, and, beneath, the cross-legged figure's posture recalls



Figure 2.9 Ojo de Agua Monument 1. Photo (a) by Michael Love; drawing (b) courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation

seated, three-dimensional figures from the Gulf Coast (see Cyphers 2004: fig. 22). Although these elements link the Ojo de Agua monument to Early Preclassic Gulf Coast Olmec traditions, the artist who crafted this object was also experimenting with novel devices, including the figure's large “sandwich board” pectoral and goggle-rimmed eyes. The erect, standing posture of the Ojo de Agua figure sets it apart from the majority of Gulf Coast monuments (beyond Laguna de los Cerros Monument 19), but puts it in dialogue with the Alvaro Obregón monument also from the Pacific Coast (Fig. 2.8b).

Monument 3 from Ojo de Agua (Fig. 2.10), 85 cm tall, also speaks to the tensions between tradition and innovation that characterized Pacific slope sculpture at the cusp of the Middle Preclassic period. The monument was removed by a landowner but its find spot was investigated within days of its removal by John Hodgson, who reported that it was associated with Jocotal-phase artifacts and “an impressive platform on the eastern edge of the central complex of mounds and platforms” (Clark and Hodgson 2007–2008: 47). Given this context, and Ojo de Agua's single-phase occupation, Clark and Hodgson surmised that the monument could date to no later than 1000 BC. However, the monument's formal and iconographic attributes anticipate developments that would blossom more fully during the Middle Preclassic period.

It portrays a regally garbed, striding individual with a swept-back cranium, rectilinear eye, and snarling mouth who wears a towering headdress at the top of which is perched, rather precariously, a wide-brimmed hat

*a*

0 25
cm

b

Figure 2.10 Ojo de Agua Monument 3. Photo (a) and drawing (b) courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation

(Halperin (2014: 91).²⁷ Andrea Stone (2014: 52; also see Coe 1989: 169) argued that such hats, in later periods, were part of an iconographic complex that alluded to travel, pilgrimage, trade, hunting, and ambassadorial events. On Monument 3, the wide-brimmed hat bears a cleft at its top, from which emerges a diamond-shaped motif. During the Preclassic period, this motif signified sprouting maize and carried associations with agricultural fertility and, more generally, rulership (Fields 1991).

Behind the protagonist appears a tall vertical object that Clark and Hodgson (2007–2008: 44) interpreted as a stela. I would counter that it signifies a bundle or sack that has been rendered in such a way as to reveal its contents: a small figure – likely signifying a carved votive, statue, or effigy axe – whose cleft head also emits a sprout. Numerous examples of comparable, but mostly unprovenienced, Preclassic effigy axes, often between 20 and 40 cm in height and with cleft heads like the diminutive Ojo de Agua figure, are known, as are many examples of Olmec-style stone figurines whose attributes also parallel the smaller Ojo de Agua figure.²⁸

My suggestion that the vertical object behind the protagonist on Ojo de Agua Monument 3 is a bundle is based on comparison with other objects. A small jade standing figure included in *The Olmec World* exhibition (Princeton 1995: 222) carries a sack on his back from which emerges a cleft object. The sack's surface is decorated with incised chevrons not unlike those marking the vertical object on Monument 3. Another small (12.7 cm in height) object, carved from volcanic stone and included in the same exhibition, portrays a crouching individual whose left arm extends around a bundle that, prior to breakage, possessed a tall, rectilinear shape (Princeton 1995: 222). This formal arrangement, in which an individual extends an arm around a bundle, persevered into later periods, as did the use of a pictorial device through which the contents of the bundle were rendered visible. A Late Classic ceramic whistle figurine attributed to Campeche and now in the Yale University Art Gallery portrays an individual, presumably a merchant or vendor, unfurling a bundle, cloth, or stiff board whose contents include jewels, feathers, and other items.²⁹ A mural in the Red Temple at Terminal Classic Cacaxtla portrays a merchant deity standing before a tall bundle whose contents are also clearly displayed (Brittenham 2015: fig. 214). Anchored to the bundle, too, is a wide-brimmed hat, which, like the bundle itself, alludes to the deity's association with long-distance trade.

I would assert that Ojo de Agua Monument 3 represents the early crystallization of an iconography that combined references to maize agriculture, emblems of political authority, and the trade/transportation of

precious objects, in this case an effigy axe. Although Lesure (2009: 250) qualified that, during the Jocotal phase along the Pacific Coast, the regional subsistence system was only “on the verge” of taking significant steps toward an emphasis on maize agriculture, we see on Monument 3 the implementation of a broadly shared iconography that linked maize symbolism to articulations of authority. The imagery on Ojo de Agua Monument 3, perhaps carved during the transition from the Early to the Middle Preclassic period, also anticipates the dynamic compositions that would come to characterize the Middle Preclassic period. At Ojo de Agua, the narrative engagement is between the striding protagonist and a bundle that contained a precious object encoded with the same suite of elite symbolism as the protagonist himself. We know from objects like an unprovenienced Olmec carved jade that depicts a standing male figure clasping an effigy axe to his chest (Princeton 1995: 160) that the presentation of these effigy axes was significant enough to be captured and rendered in a rare and precious material. Perhaps the transportation of the cleft-headed axe figure featured on Ojo de Agua Monument 3 ultimately culminated in a ceremony like that envisioned by the jade figure. The allusion, on Monument 3, to a world of very real, tangible, and recognizable things – from bundles to effigy axes – is quite precocious, and would become an important hallmark of Preclassic sculpture in later eras.

Monument 3 takes the shape of a stela, a sculptural format that would gain momentum after the close of the Early Preclassic period. Its defined pictorial field, restricted to the frontal face of the sculpture, is also unusual at this early date.³⁰ To my mind, the iconographic and formal properties of the monument bear more in common with Middle Preclassic, rather than Early Preclassic, trends. At any rate, Ojo de Agua Monument 3 attests to the formal and iconographic experimentation that characterized the Early to Middle Preclassic transition, much of which was centered around human protagonists – albeit, at times, with supernatural attributes – situated in narrative frameworks of some sort.³¹

Early Preclassic Sculpture: A Summary of Thoughts

Before continuing with the Middle Preclassic period, I wish to linger on the importance of the development of narrative frameworks within Early Preclassic artistic traditions, and especially on the significance of humans as key protagonists within these compositions. Fortunately for my arguments, Tate (2012: 122–126) recently provided an excellent discussion of early narrative

compositions in Mesoamerica. She also convincingly justified her use of the term “narrative,” which typically pertains to spoken or written evidence rather than visual art forms.

According to Tate, Dorie Reents-Budet (1989) was the first scholar to apply Kurt Weitzmann’s (1970) narrative typologies – “simultaneous,” “monoscenic,” and “cyclic” – to Mesoamerican art. Reents-Budet demonstrated that Classic Maya scribes incorporated monoscenic narratives into stela compositions in order to capture a single moment in time in addition to other aspects of that event.³² Yet, as Tate cautioned, our understanding of the ways in which narrative time was presented and understood by ancient Mesoamericans is incomplete at best. The eventual addition of hieroglyphic dates and texts to pictorial compositions contributed to a temporal framework that was not necessarily linear but, instead, folded in on itself. A composition might include textual elements that referenced lengthy periods of time but imagery that captured only a single moment. Or a scene might be highly idealized or include otherworldly components but be accompanied by historically specific characters or textual references.

Tate pointed to San Lorenzo Monument 14 (Fig. 2.1) as Early Preclassic evidence of compositional explorations designed to invoke multiple nodes in time, a history, or a storyline of some sort. Temporal and spatial multiplicity was achieved “because the viewer perceives the high-relief figure in its cave niche on the front as performing one kind of action in a specific space, but the profile images on the sides are in low relief and seem to be in another space” (Tate 2012: 124). This format necessitates viewer participation: one needs not only to move around the massive sculpture but to remember each side and piece together the details. Tate also commented on the implied narratives crafted by groups of objects in the San Lorenzo polity, including the paired jaguars and humans of Loma del Zapote (Fig. 2.6) as well as the grouping of a colossal head, a feline, an altar/throne, and a water trough at San Lorenzo proper (Cyphers 1999: 163–164). These various displays each invited active viewing and required an observer to move around and between the objects, making connections that were visual and cerebral.

Such displays indicate a sophisticated understanding of the power of intervisuality. The term “intervisuality” refers to the fact that all representations have larger operational contexts, which involve any number of visual interactions throughout space and between objects. For Nicholas Mirzoeff (2001: 124), who coined the term, intervisuality also encompasses non-visual media, all of which is constantly subject to shifting relationships of interdependence. Intervisuality recognizes the role of

the viewer, who must draw on the mind’s capacity for memory and the ability to connect, reconnect, and continually reassemble the threads of story lines and meanings dispersed between objects, between moments in time, and between individuals. Intervisuality seems key, for example, to the imagery of Ojo de Agua Monument 3. Assuming that the diminutive cleft-headed figure is a representation of an effigy axe, framed against the textured surface of a bundle, then we might imagine that viewers connected the scene encoded on the sculpture to other moments in time, during which precious objects were transported, revealed, and utilized in ceremonies.

The concept of intervisuality, perhaps most significantly, acknowledges that meaning does not reside only within individual representations, in stasis; it is more dynamic than that, and can be activated and reconstituted through engagement with multiple objects, and even memories, by audiences of all types. These formulations do not rely solely on objects stationed adjacent to each other, or even those deliberately set into conversation with each other, but extend to the vast network of imagery and other non-visual connections at any given polity or even between polities and regions. What I find particularly valuable about the concept of intervisuality is its recognition of the role of the viewer, who is critical to the formulation of the connections between objects, people, and places. Other terms have been coined to denote comparable processes. Jaś Elsner (2010: 157), for example, referred to the establishment of a fifteenth-century Italian image discourse that crafted vital interrelationships between different churches, patrons, parishioners, and towns as “contextual contiguity” or “iconographic interreferentiality.”

Critical to the intervisuality or interreferentiality of Early Preclassic art, I would assert, was the human body: not only living human bodies, of course, but also the stone representations thereof that served as key and recurring nodes within networks of meaning.³³ De la Fuente was entirely correct, in other words, in calling attention to the significance of human representations in Preclassic art. Monumental human forms carved of stone, regardless of size or whether they were austere iconic or couched in a narrative framework, must have resonated with audiences because of their engagement with the human form. They must have been striking in a world in which monumental sculpture was still new and unusual. But they also must have called to mind for viewers not only their own physical bodies but also those of the innumerable, small, clay representations of humans that were fundamental to daily ritual in Preclassic Mesoamerica (and to which I turn, in detail, in ensuing chapters) (Fig. 1.2). The monumental sculptures served, in a sense, as a repository of all peoples’

memories, not only those of the ruling elites who likely commissioned them.

This last point is important to stress. Intervisual connections anchored in representations of the human form were not, in other words, unique to the world of monumental sculpture or pertinent only to the world of elite actors or the confines of ceremonial plazas. Engagement with human representations was, during the Early Preclassic period, a fact of life and one in which diverse people had a vested and sustained interest.

Middle Preclassic (1000–300 BC) Sculpture on the Gulf Coast

Monumental sculpture continued to be a relatively rare phenomenon throughout the Middle Preclassic period, with extensive sculptural inventories known only from the sites of La Venta in Tabasco, Chalcatzingo in the highlands of Morelos, and Takalik Abaj in the sloping Pacific piedmont of Guatemala. A focus on the human body, however, persisted, as did experimentation with the ways in which it could be inserted into narrative compositions. Tate (2012: 131) noted a proliferation of striding humans, rendered in profile, after approximately 850 BC, both within the Olmec heartland, as at Viejón, in Central Veracruz (Milbrath 1979: 37, fig. 74), and at sites beyond its confines, as in the case of San Miguel Amuco, Guerrero (Grove and Paradis 1971; Tate 2012: fig. 4–57).³⁴ Tate (2012: 131) cautioned that we should not assume, however, that all of these striding individuals necessarily represent rulers; careful analysis reveals a range of potential roles that exceeds the office of kingship. Middle Preclassic monuments also continued to blur the boundaries between human and divine, confounding attempts to securely identify specific identities and roles for some individuals.

I begin my discussion with the site of La Venta, which rose to power following the decline of San Lorenzo.³⁵ Early researchers at La Venta (Drucker 1952; Drucker et al. 1959; Heizer et al. 1968; Stirling 1943, 1955) praised the extraordinary assemblage of sculpture there but also noted patterns of use and reuse throughout the center's complex construction history.³⁶ Many of the monuments share a canon of forms with their counterparts at San Lorenzo, such as the massive altar/thrones (La Venta Altars 2–5), the colossal heads (Monuments 2–4), or the human forms carved in the round such as Monument 9 (see González Lauck 1994). Nevertheless, as Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera (2006: 48) discerned, the frequency of isolated stone figures at La Venta diminished in comparison to San Lorenzo. Cyphers (2014: 1019) further observed that sculpture at La Venta tended to be

larger in scale than at San Lorenzo, evidence in her opinion of “a higher scale of labour mobilisation and an overall increase in elite power.”

Continued narrative experimentation is a hallmark of Middle Preclassic art and evident in a number of La Venta compositions. La Venta Stela 5, for example, portrays a complicated scene whose context, amid a group of otherwise iconic stelae aligned along the southern end of the basal platform of the Structure C-1 pyramid, serves only to call attention to the novelty of its imagery (Fig. 2.11a) (González Lauck 1997, 2010: 137, fig. 6.4).³⁷ Its composition features an encounter between three individuals, with a fourth descending from above.³⁸ The imagery is not fully restricted to the front of the monument, but wraps around ever so slightly onto one side.

A similarly narrative configuration characterizes La Venta Stela 3 (Fig. 2.11b). On this monument, two prominent figures face each other; the headdress of the figure on the left is exceptionally towering. The imagery unfolds within a defined pictorial field demarcated by a basal band carved in low relief. This ground line effectively anchors the two standing figures to the terrestrial sphere while diminutive figures hover above in looser postures. Securing the identification of the standing figures is difficult. While their costumes suggest elite status, it would be impossible to confirm whether they represent rulers. The areas of damage and effacement to the monument exacerbate this predicament, as does the ambiguity of the floating individuals: Do they represent supernaturals or secondary individuals of lesser status? Is their smaller scale intended to suggest depth and distance, as Robert Heizer (1967: 36) suggested? Questions like these do not elicit ready answers, but they highlight the compositional innovations of these monuments, in which a cast of characters – presumably of different rank or nature – was assembled within a monoscenic narrative that was tailored to the stelae form.

La Venta Monument 63 (Fig. 2.11c), which takes an almost columnar shape, features a single human figure confronting an ophidian creature that towers above him in a composition that compares to San Lorenzo Monument 56 (Fig. 2.7b) (Cyphers 2004: 121, figs. 68, 69).³⁹ Parallels such as this are a reminder of the difficulties in precisely dating narrative developments: the columnar form of the San Lorenzo monument hints at a potentially late date for it, while the relatively simple composition of La Venta Monument 63 – compared with that of La Venta Stelae 5 or 3, for example – may indicate an earlier date. It seems prudent to leave open the possibility that there may have been an overlapping span of time in which artists at each of these centers experimented with comparable narrative formats.

*a**b**c**d*

Figure 2.11 La Venta sculpture: (a) Stela 5; (b) Stela 3; (c) Monument 63; (d) Stela 2. Photo (a) by Linda Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.; photo (b) courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project; photos (c) and (d) by Michael Love

La Venta Stela 2 (Fig. 2.11d) (González Lauck 1994: fig. 6.2) raises equally unanswerable questions concerning the relative duration of time in which certain compositional devices retained popularity, only to ultimately fade away and then be revived again at a later date. Stela 2 shares formal attributes with Stelae 3 and 5 and Monument 63, including floating individuals whose secondary status is accentuated by their relatively shallow relief in comparison to the volume afforded the central protagonist. Yet Stela 2's more pronounced three-dimensionality sets it apart from the other narrative monuments. This indicates, to my mind, ongoing experimentation with monoscenic compositions and the role of volume in lending clarity to the presentation of various individuals.⁴⁰

Of fundamental importance to my discussion is the fact that it is humans, or anthropomorphic individuals, which continued to figure most prominently into Middle Preclassic narrative scenes, whether interacting with each other or with a zoomorphic creature as on La Venta Monument 63. Even moving back in time to San Lorenzo it is clear that the presence of a human or anthropomorphic supernatural character was required, as if a catalyst for narrativity. In no case, at La Venta or San Lorenzo (at least to date), do we see narrative scenes that feature only zoomorphic creatures: humans, or mythic individuals, seem to have been absolutely critical to narrative expression. We do find low-relief monuments such as San Lorenzo Monument 21, which portrays a loping quadruped, perhaps a dog or coyote (Cyphers 2004: 85, fig. 41), or San Lorenzo Monument 30, which depicts an equally animated supernatural creature (Cyphers 2004: fig. 46). So, too, the serpent whose sinuous body emerges in low relief from two deeply carved holes on Loma del Zapote Monument 6 is lively. Even the avian footprints of San Lorenzo Monument 106 spark the imagination (Cyphers 2004: figs. 162, 117). But in these cases, there is a distinct lack of narrative structure; the creatures stand alone.⁴¹

I realize that extending my arguments too far in this direction would be dangerous. The sculptural montage at Loma del Zapote (Fig. 2.6) reminds us that monuments were probably rarely static and, even more significantly, quite often conceived in tandem with others. Their narrative power surely existed within a larger intervisual sphere. González Lauck (2010: 145–147) rightly criticized scholars who characterize Preclassic sculptures as isolated objects, bereft of larger conceptual groupings. Cyphers (1996: 68; also see Cyphers and Di Castro 2009: 28–29, Grove 1999), too, argued that the full meaning of Olmec sculpture can be gleaned only when pieces are viewed as part of larger displays, which evoked numerous concepts and transmitted a variety of messages, to borrow her

words. More recently, Tate (2012) proffered similar arguments for La Venta. Yet a cursory perusal of the monument clusters identified by these authors underscores the significance of the human form within these groupings: at San Lorenzo, Loma del Zapote, and La Venta, the presence of a human body – or, at the very least, a divine body rendered in anthropomorphic form – is essential.⁴²

At Middle Preclassic La Venta it is clear that narratives became progressively complex and increasingly focused on humans or anthropomorphic divinities and their interactions. Even the sides of Middle Preclassic altar/thrones at La Venta, whose forms were, arguably, quite conservative, reveal a flowering of narrative interactions between humans. On La Venta Altar 3 (González Lauck 2010: fig. 6.5), figures along the side of the monument gesture at one another or stride toward the central niche figure. On La Venta Altar 5, elaborately garbed individuals grasp rambunctious and supernaturally endowed babies (Fig. 2.12a) (González Lauck 1994: fig. 6.28; 2010: fig. 6.7). Comparable narrative interactions between humans, within a single compositional field, are exceedingly rare in greater San Lorenzo: only on Tenochtitlán Monument 1 do we see a direct encounter between two ostensibly human figures (Cyphers 2004: figs. 148, 149). While early altar/thrones at San Lorenzo portray more than one individual – and do, indeed, imply a relationship between them – to suggest that they demonstrate narrative engagement would be a stretch. Even if we extend discussion to include Middle Preclassic Olmec-style rock art in the central Mexican highlands, my assertion that humans were a requisite component of narrative frameworks holds true. For example, Juxtlahuaca Painting 1 depicts two humans, one standing and the other seated, who pass a cord or rope of some sort between them (Gay 1967; Grove 1970: fig. 34).⁴³ In Oxtotitlán North Grotto Painting 1-d (Grove 1970: fig. 13) it is a human and a feline who interact.

Several final points are necessary before setting the sculptural corpus of the Gulf Coast aside. It is useful, heuristically, to characterize the Early Preclassic period as one focused primarily on volumetric compositions, and the Middle Preclassic as one that witnessed a marked transition to more two-dimensional creations whose prepared surfaces accommodated increasingly narrative compositions. But this generalization obscures the tensions between these two extremes. Artists continued to capitalize on the expressive potential of *both* volume and plane throughout the course of the Preclassic period. La Venta Monument 13, which probably dates to the final years of the site's florescence, illustrates this well (Fig. 2.12b).⁴⁴ Stephanie Strauss (2018a: 109; Guernsey and Strauss n. d.) observed that the carefully prepared and highly



Figure 2.12 La Venta sculpture: (a) Altar 5; (b) Monument 13. Photo (a) by author; photo (b) by Michael Love

polished surface of the sculpture stands in stark contrast to its bulky, unmodified natural basalt form. It is a marriage, of sorts, between a certain fetishization of the boulder's natural form and a keen interest in a flattened surface that accommodated both image and writing. The flattened surface of La Venta Monument 13 features a striding male figure whose implied momentum compares to that of other individuals in the corpus of Middle Preclassic art (Tate 2012: 131). Setting him apart, however, are the four glyph-like elements adjacent to his body, which may constitute the oldest example of columnar inscription in Mesoamerica (Houston 2004).⁴⁵ Strauss called attention to the innovations of Monument 13, in which the action is complemented by the textual elements. The disembodied human footprint to the left of the figure – whether symbol or text – reiterates the bodily nature of the imagery and, as if echoing the dynamism of the individual, alludes to movement. Early Preclassic San Lorenzo Monument 106 (Cyphers 2004: fig. 117) demonstrates that artists were aware of the emotive impact of footprints, human or animal, of the way they stand in for bodies still present or long disappeared. But on San Lorenzo Monument 106, the avian footprints are only that: they reference a body, but do not display it. On La Venta Monument 13, the footprint, in spite of being disembodied, very clearly references the adjacent and intact human body, as well as its implied movement through space, step by step.

The human body on La Venta Monument 13 is conveyed purely through the sinuous contours of the areas of stone preserved in raised relief; there are no internal details, no allusion to the body's musculature or skeletal structure. Elsewhere in Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica, however, artists approached representation of the

human body in a very different manner. Monument 4 from Los Naranjos, Honduras, dated to the early part of the Middle Preclassic period, renders an anthropomorphic body in an exceedingly volumetric, three-dimensional form whose physicality is palpable (R. Joyce and Henderson 2002: 16–17, fig. 11). The attention paid to the figure's musculoskeletal system, particularly the delineation of the rib cage and musculature of the neck, departs considerably from Gulf Coast norms.

Monuments from Tres Zapotes, Veracruz, demonstrate similar tensions between tradition and innovation. The colossal heads at that site, as well as a fragmentary seated figure (Monument I), compare to sculpture at both San Lorenzo and La Venta (Milbrath 1979; Pool 2010; Porter 1989a, b). Tres Zapotes Stelae A and D (Pool 2010: figs. 5.4, 5.5) parallel niche monuments at La Venta and reveal a sustained interest in both the mass of the boulders from which they were carved and more planar surfaces used to supply pictorial details in lower relief. Many of the formal attributes of Stela A, including the volumetric central figure and shallowly rendered, profile figures to its side, parallel those of La Venta Stela 2, yet the monument's proscenium-like niche is more in keeping with La Venta Stela 1. At Tres Zapotes, as at La Venta, human figures were conceptualized in a variety of forms, both iconically as in the case of Tres Zapotes Monument M (Pool 2010: fig. 5.3) and in narrative frameworks that incorporated various levels of relief carving. Monuments such as Tres Zapotes Stela D (Fig. 2.13) also illustrate that posture – rather than a difference in volume – was employed to communicate relative social rank: the kneeling figure on the left appears to defer to the standing figures before him.⁴⁶



Figure 2.13 Tres Zapotes Stela D. Photo courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project



Figure 2.14 View, from left to right, of Chalcatzingo Monuments 6, 7, and 1. Photo by Linda Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

Middle Preclassic Sculpture in the Central Mexican Highlands

The human body played an equally key role in the burgeoning artistic programs of Middle Preclassic sites located throughout the central Mexican highlands. At Chalcatzingo, human bodies were incorporated into a number of complex and, at times, highly narrative compositions carved onto the faces of boulders or bedrock exposures that lined a footpath along the talus slope of Cerro Chalcatzingo (Grove 1987).⁴⁷ Jorge Angulo (1987: 141) and Kent Reilly (1994: 102–116) described a series of petroglyphs, which present consecutive events that unfold across the surface of adjacent boulders (Fig. 2.14). Angulo included Monuments 11, 8, 14, 15, 6, 7, and 1 in a sequence that, moving from left to right, reveals a narrative concerning zoomorphic creatures, the arrival of rain, and resultant agricultural fertility (Fig. 2.15a) (Reilly 1994). Angulo argued that the sequence climaxed with Monument 1, in which rain streams down from clouds onto an enormous quatrefoil portal in which a presumed ruler is enthroned (Fig. 2.15b). Reilly, by contrast, viewed Chalcatzingo Monuments 11, 8, 14, 15, 6, and 7 as a distinct assemblage, which he referred to as the Water Dancing Group, separate from Monument 1 but sharing with it the theme of rain. Angulo's inclusion of Monument 1 within this sequence is significant to the arguments that I have been building. If, as Reilly argued, Monuments 11, 8, 14, 15, 6, and 7 functioned independently, it would mean that a narrative concerning the arrival of rain did not necessitate the involvement of a human; it included only bellowing animals, sprouting plants, and rain-bearing clouds. Not surprisingly, therefore, I agree with Angulo that Monument 1 was conceptually integrated within this group of



Figure 2.15 Chalcatzingo monuments: (a) rubbing of Monuments 11, 8, 14, 15, 6, and 7 by F. Kent Reilly III; (b) Monument 1. Panel (a) after Angulo (1987: figs. 10.1–10.6); photo (b) by Michael Love

petroglyphs, where it serves as the culminating moment in which the arrival of rain is attributed to the intervention of the ruler who communes with the supernatural world, symbolized by his presence in the quatrefoil, a motif that throughout the course of Mesoamerican history symbolized a portal to the otherworld.⁴⁸

The setting of the sculptures lining the slope of Cerro Chalcatzingo is remarkable. They were not integrated into the urban center, which spread out across terraces at the base of the hill. Instead, artists took advantage of the natural rock surfaces that lined what was likely an ancient pilgrimage path along the sides of the mountain (Angulo 1987: 157). Their context, in other words, existed in a domain that was at once both natural and modified by human hands. A similar tension between natural rock and human modification characterizes the images themselves.⁴⁹ With Monument 1, one perceives the same attentiveness to raw stone seen at other Middle Preclassic sites, in which the imagery is subservient to the stone's undulations and even its cleavages. The fact that a large portion of the boulder had sheared off in the past did not deter the artist from organizing the imagery across surfaces of dramatically different heights. Angulo (1987: 144) noted as much with regard to another petroglyph, Monument 3, in which the irregularities of the surface were accentuated, rather than eliminated. For him, Chalcatzingo artists

worked to create a large, undulating, abstract surface with many concavities. It is evident that the form of the rock face was caused not by natural erosion but by human agency, possibly to complement the carved relief. . . . The interiors of several of the concavities appear to have been reworked to enlarge them with a tool which left long parallel scratches, similar to marks left by jaguar claws.

The imagery of these boulder monuments seems more organically linked to the natural surfaces and contours of the stone than that of stelae at the site. For example, while Monument 21 (Fig. 2.16a), a stela, retains some of the original rock's contours and, more fully, its rippling surface, it was carefully shaped. There is also overt attention to a compositional field defined by an inverted U-shaped motif at the base that serves as a ground line for the female figure, who can be identified as such by the breast clearly rendered in profile as well as the long skirt more typically associated with gendered-female costuming (Cyphers 1984; Grove and Angulo 1987: 126–127). The woman reaches toward a large vertical object, as if supporting it. It may represent a bundled stela (Reilly 2006: 7) or, perhaps, a bundle like that on Ojo de Agua Monument 3. On Monument 21,

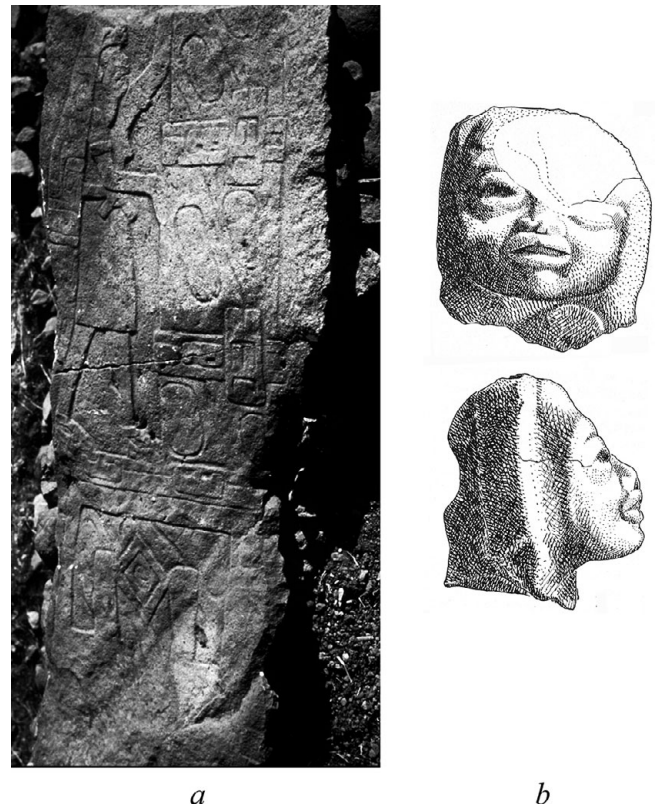


Figure 2.16 Chalcatzingo sculpture: (a) Monument 21; (b) Monument 17, front and side views. Photo (a) by Linda Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.; drawings (b) courtesy of David Grove

two horizontal bands encircle the object, each of which features a cleft maize kernel motif.

Cyphers (1984: 119, 121) noted that the depiction of a woman in monumental Preclassic art is unusual, although, within the corpus of ceramic figurines, the opposite is true. Questions concerning the representational norms for communicating gender in the corpus of Preclassic art, monumental or not, are many and complex. Billie Follensbee (2014: 209) argued that “assertions of sex or gender in Olmec imagery have often been based in *argumentum ad ignorantiam* – asserting a conclusion based on the absence of features rather than on the presence of features.” Joyce (2000a: 29, 42), although primarily concerned with figurines, encouraged scholars to view Preclassic representations as “media for presenting an aspect of human identity that is independent of sharply marked dichotomous sexes, a sexually neutral human image.” Many Preclassic objects – figurines, monuments, as well as small Preclassic greenstone carvings – appear to elide categories of male and female.⁵⁰ Yet it is difficult to determine whether a lack of secondary sexual characteristics on objects small or large signified a sexually neutral identity or a dual-gendered nature. We are wise to follow Joyce (2001: 109), who argued that

gender in ancient Mesoamerica was “not an essential, innate, and immutable quality in the classic European mode, but rather produced, from an original androgyny or encompassment of sexual possibilities, by creative action in mythological time and recreated by social means in individual time.”⁵¹

Compared with Chalcatzingo Monument 21, with its emphasis on gesture, other monuments at Chalcatzingo are quite iconic. Monument 16 (Grove and Angulo 1987: fig. 9.18) portrays a decapitated individual that resembles similar seated figures in the Gulf Coast region. Susan Milbrath (1979: 40) characterized these seated figures as monotonous due to their “rather limited range of body postures and costuming.” Monotony is surely present, but I would add that it is also effective: sculptures like these linked together polities across a wide region through shared canons of form and meaning. Such objects likely gave physical form to sociopolitical networks of individuals of comparable rank.

Chalcatzingo Monument 17 (Fig. 2.16b) (Grove and Angulo 1987: fig. 9.19) consists of a disembodied head, which was interred within a Canteras-phase burial (Burial 3) beneath Structure 1d of the central plaza. Grove (1981: 61–62) discerned that the most frequent means of sculptural mutilation at Chalcatzingo was decapitation, in which “statues were decapitated and the heads removed elsewhere.” Symbolic acts of ritual destruction, he argued, may have been deemed necessary for neutralizing the supernatural power contained within the monuments and, in particular, the head, which he suggested might represent the “seat of a soul” (Grove 1981: 62–68; see Mock 1998: 118–119 for further discussion). The context of Monument 17 inspired Joyce’s (1998: 154) assertion that a sculpture, interred like a human body, “blurs the line between body and its representation.” Angulo (1987: 155) speculated on the implications of these acts of mutilation:

Does the decapitation of a stone monument, or the destruction of the faces of sculpted personages, correspond to the same symbolism as the breaking of the heads from clay figurines (an act common from the Formative period to the conquest)? If so, and if the monumental sculptures represent deities, rulers, warriors, and religious leaders, or elite personages, couldn’t the great part of the figurines (which have defied explanation over the years) represent the common people?

Angulo’s perspicacious questions situate depictions of humans at the intersection of acts of representation and destruction, a topic I return to in detail in Chapter 5. His questions reverberate throughout this book which, three decades later, seeks to answer a similar set of queries

regarding the nature and purpose of Preclassic representations of human bodies, which were sometimes complete but, more often, fragmented.

Middle Preclassic Sculpture in Oaxaca

An impressive, yet markedly distinct, array of Middle Preclassic human representations exists at the site of Monte Albán in the Valley of Oaxaca. According to Javier Urcid and Arthur Joyce (2014: 151, fig. 9.1), the tradition of carved sculpture at Monte Albán traces its origins to small slabs carved with geometric, apparently non-representational compositions, which were incorporated into buildings at Monte Albán circa 500 BC. At some point during the Danibaán phase (550–300 BC), the orthostatic monuments known as “Danzantes,” which portray humans in contorted postures, were carved and placed on the façade of Building L-sub (Fig. 2.17a). Interpretations of the Danzantes differ considerably. It was Leopoldo Batres (1902: 28), according to John Scott (1978: 21), who first employed the name given to the sculptures by locals – *Danzantes*, or “Dancers” – in his description of Monte Albán. Coe (1962) critiqued this nomenclature, asserting that the so-called Dancers actually portrayed victims of human sacrifice. Urcid and Joyce (2014: 153; Urcid 2011a, b) more recently argued that the figures “constituted a sodality organized around age-grades,” and were shown bleeding from their groins in evidence of self-sacrifice, a signifier of proper ritual comportment throughout much of ancient Mesoamerica.

The contorted bodies of the Danzantes, as well as the compositional spaces surrounding them, were viewed as suitable surfaces for early hieroglyphic captions. Text covers the torso of the figure on orthostat D-55 (Fig. 2.17b) and also appears adjacent to his body. On orthostat N-22, a single glyph floats in the space next to



Figure 2.17 Monte Albán Danzantes: (a) D-2 and D-3; (b) D-55. Photos by Elizabeth Pope

the figure (Urcid and Joyce 2014: fig. 9.2). According to Urcid and Joyce (2014: 154–155), these texts record the names of the individuals and were contextualized within a set of inscriptions lining the basal platform of Building L-sub that “appear to record the enthronement of two, perhaps three rulers throughout a span of forty-eight years.” Urcid and Joyce also called attention to four orthostats that reference acts of decapitation, as well as a cornerstone whose texts allude to the downfall and decapitation of an enemy. The program of Building L-sub, as a conceptual whole, points to several roles for human representation in the Valley of Oaxaca at this time: as architectural decoration, as a vehicle for memorializing acts of corporeal sacrifice, as a surface for inscription, and as a crucial part of a larger program concerning social order that included acts of bloodletting, warfare, accession, decapitation, and references to calendrical time (Urcid 2011a: 207).

Urcid and Joyce (2014: 164–166) argued that incorporating the *Danzantes* into the architecture of Building L-sub served to craft a communal vision of authority during a period of intense sociopolitical transformations in the Valley of Oaxaca. This communal vision of authority, however, was mediated by cornerstone texts referencing powerful rulers and “a more exclusionary form of authority.” As they emphasized, the program gave physical form to “potentially competing forms of authority – communal and noble”:

The decision by rulers to commission architectural monuments to bolster community well-being through sacrifice, instead of the self-aggrandizement of paramount and charismatic leaders, suggests that some of the societal uses of early architecture and writing in Oaxaca served the purpose of internal power-building strategies stemming from the potential factionalism of diverse constituencies. (Urcid and Joyce 2014: 165)

Urcid and Joyce’s arguments work well with those developed in this book, in which human bodies serve as the pivot around which assertions of social order are articulated. Yet they cautioned that these assertions must always be taken with a grain of salt, that “ideological representations would have misrepresented inequalities by promoting group solidarity and identity” and masked the “inherent contradictions and potential points of tension” that undoubtedly characterized relationships between nobles and commoners (Urcid and Joyce 2014: 165). Perhaps most significant at Monte Albán is the fact that the *Danzantes* – of which there are hundreds – took advantage of the human form to articulate a communal vision of the corporate body and prioritized it over representation of a single paramount ruler.

Middle Preclassic Sculpture in Southeastern Mesoamerica

Having framed, at least in general terms, Middle Preclassic sculptural developments along the Gulf Coast, in the central Mexican highlands, and in Oaxaca, I turn now to the Pacific slope, the adjacent Guatemalan Highlands, and, briefly, the Maya Lowlands. By the dawn of the Middle Preclassic period, there was a clear tradition – albeit a persistently spotty one – of monumental stone sculpture along the Pacific slope. A shift in economic and political power from the Mazatán zone to regions east of the Río Suchiate, which forms the boundary between modern Mexico and Guatemala, occurred in the early part of the Middle Preclassic period. There, polities such as Takalik Abaj and La Blanca burgeoned, witnessing dramatic growth in population and the “development of a regional system that was much larger and more hierarchically structured than anything previously seen” (Love 2007: 288–289). Monumental sculpture continued to make an appearance at centers to the west of Mazatán and occasionally in the Guatemalan Highlands, but no site in southeastern Mesoamerica rivaled the impressive sculptural developments of Takalik Abaj. The corpus of sculpture at Takalik Abaj, a community nestled in the sloping piedmont between the Pacific Coast and the Guatemalan Highlands, demonstrates both connections to the broader Olmec communication sphere and the development of regionally specific forms and themes.⁵²

In spite of their stylistic variation, Middle Preclassic monuments at Takalik Abaj attest to a sustained focus on representation of the human form. Christa Schieber de Lavarreda and Miguel Orrego Corzo (2010: 195) estimated that, “Of the thirty-eight Olmec monuments found at the site, the most frequent themes were niche figures (nine), full-figured human beings or heads (eight), animals (seven), and human prisoners (six).” Yet few, if any, portray the complex, monoscenic narratives with multiple participants found at La Venta or Chalcatzingo. Most focus on a single individual, although that person, as in the case of the severely damaged niche-style Monument 67, is often quite animated (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego 2010: fig. 8.9d).

Takalik Abaj Monuments 1 and 64, both lightly carved onto the surfaces of massive boulders situated along the margins of the site center, adhere to similar conventions. Monument 1 (Fig. 2.18a, b), located to the east of the Central Group but west of the Río Ichhiyá, may mark the boundaries of the site proper. The figure on Monument 1 wears an elaborate headdress and possesses a typical Olmec-style everted upper lip. Its posture,

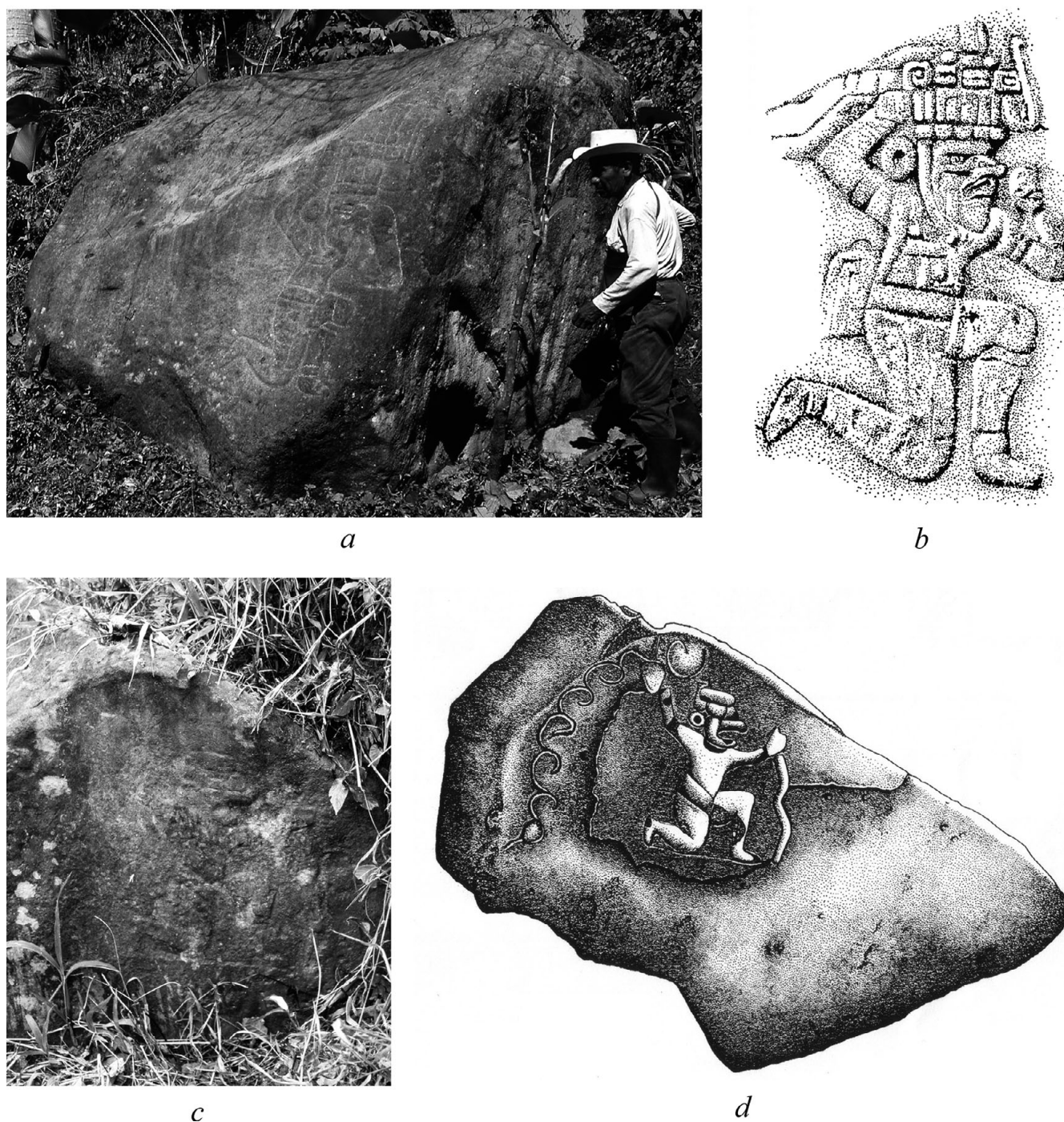


Figure 2.18 Takalik Abaj boulder monuments: (a) Monument 1; (b) Monument 1, detail of figure; (c) and (d) Monument 64. Photo (a) courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project; drawing (b) courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project; photo (c) by Michael Love; drawing (d) courtesy of the Parque Arqueológico Nacional Tak'alik Ab'aj/Dirección General del Patrimonio Cultural y Natural, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, Guatemala

interestingly enough, compares – only in reverse – to that of an individual on a stela from Finca La Unión, located in Cacahoatán just to the north of Izapa in a pass that leads into the Guatemalan Highlands (Fig. 2.19) (Clark and Pye 2000: 222; Guernsey 2012: 39; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego 2010: 196–197). Both Takalik Abaj

Monument 1 and the Finca La Unión stela were situated at transitional locations, which marked either boundaries or paths of communication. They, like the monumental heads at La Venta, the Cobata head that marks the divide between the lower Papaloapan and Tepango valleys outside Tres Zapotes (Pool 2010), or even, perhaps, the

colossal heads at San Lorenzo before them, may evidence the use of human bodies – complete or fragmentary, fully human or endowed with supernatural attributes – to mark political territories or paths of strategic communication.

Monument 64 (Fig. 2.18c, d), likewise stylistically dated to the Middle Preclassic period (Popenoe de Hatch 2004), bears imagery closely related to that of Monument 1 and Finca La Unión Stela 1 and, like them, served a role in defining the contours of the urban environment at Takalik Abaj. Monument 64 was recovered in an area of the site known as El Escondite, located directly to the

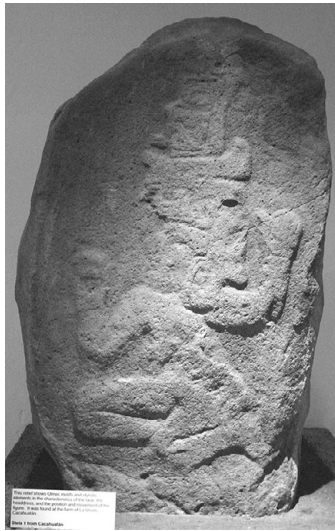


Figure 2.19 Finca La Unión stela. Photo by Michael Love

west of Terrace 3, in a natural depression that, while prone to seasonal inundations, revealed the earliest residential compounds dating to the first part of the Middle Preclassic period (Popenoe de Hatch 2004; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego 2001: 31; Schieber de Lavarreda and Pérez 2004). I argued that the monument, perched on the east bank of the El Chorro rivulet that connected to a series of aqueducts carrying water to the south, portrays an anthropomorphic water deity (Guernsey 2010a: 216–217).⁵³ Other centers, from Early Preclassic San Lorenzo (Coe and Diehl 1980: 361–362) to Late Preclassic Izapa (Guernsey 2006b: 120–126; 2010a), also erected sculpture bearing images of water gods adjacent to public works designed to effectively transport water. Takalik Abaj Monument 64, through its imagery as well as its context, forged a link between the actions of the anthropomorphic deity and the practical domain of public works achieved under the auspices of a ruler.

Only about 50 km from Takalik Abaj, but a world away in terms of sculpture, is the contemporaneous site of La Blanca. The few fragments of monumental stone sculpture found to date at La Blanca point to its participation in broader Olmec spheres of communication. Monument 1 (Fig. 2.20a), the disembodied head of a larger stone sculpture, bears distinctly Olmec-style facial features including an everted upper lip that closely resembles one on Takalik Abaj Monument 55 (Love 1999b: fig. 78, 2010: fig. 7.2a). It shares its broad nose and deeply recessed eye sockets with another sculpture at La



a



b

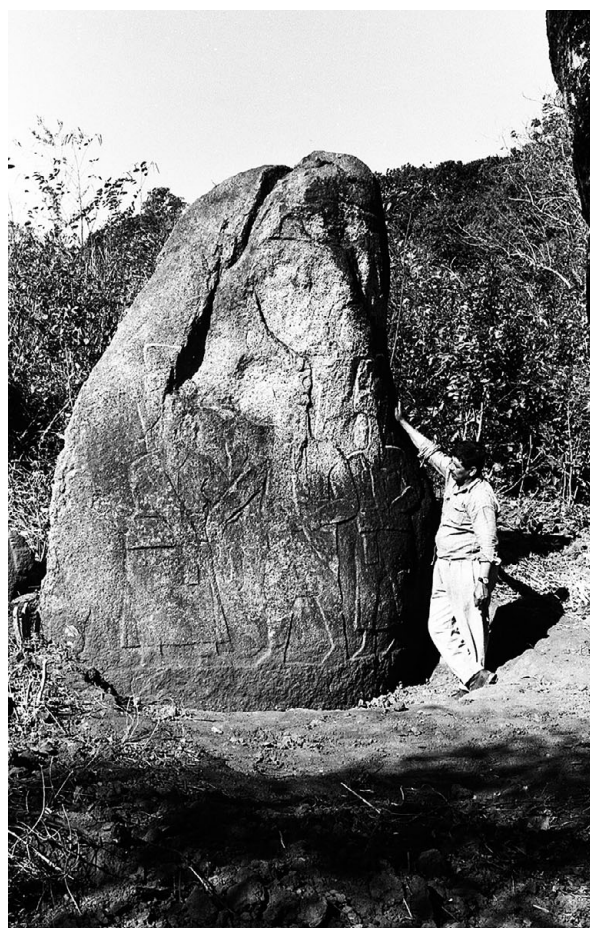
Figure 2.20 La Blanca sculpture: (a) Monument 1; (b) Monument 4. Photo (a) by Michael Love; photo (b) by author

Blanca, Monument 4, which was created from fired clay and discovered in an elite domestic residence on the East Acropolis (Fig. 2.20b) (Love 2010: fig. 7.4; Love and Guernsey 2011).⁵⁴ The original height of Monument 4 was approximately 40 cm, which, combined with its 4-cm-thick side walls, rendered the object far too heavy to be worn as a mask (Love 2010: 154). Substituting for a mouth is an inverted, cleft maize kernel. La Blanca Monuments 1 and 4 both display the same conflation of human and supernatural attributes seen on sculpture at other centers, as well as comparable evidence of deliberate fragmentation. At La Blanca, we have only vestiges of what, at one time, must have been a tradition of monumental, representational sculpture that took form in both stone and clay.

Preclassic monuments at the site of Pijijiapan, located near the modern town of Tonalá, Chiapas, have been variously dated to the Early or Middle Preclassic periods, at times by the same author.⁵⁵ However, the sophistication of the scene on Pijijiapan Monument 1 (Fig. 2.21a),

a massive boulder carved in low relief with a series of interacting figures, closely parallels that of contemporary monuments at La Venta and fits more convincingly, in my opinion, in the Middle Preclassic period. As with Ojo de Agua Monument 3, the monuments at Pijijiapan remind us not only of the persistent difficulties in dating sculpture in general, but of the fact that our desire, as scholars, to insert sculptures into a chronological framework must be balanced by recognition that stylistic and iconographic developments never adhered, in the ancient past, to the temporal boundaries that we impose retrospectively.

The incorporation of a base line and celestial panel above the central scene indicate, on Pijijiapan Monument 1, a marked interest in defining a compositional field that continues, ever so slightly, onto the sides of the boulder (Clark and Pye 2000: 220–221; Milbrath 1979: 27).⁵⁶ The protagonist turns toward one of two flanking individuals, and additional, more diminutive figures may also be present. The attention paid to rendering the elaborately attired individuals, who wear headdresses and



a



b

Figure 2.21 Boulder sculpture: (a) Pijijiapan Monument 1; (b) Chalchuapa Monument 12. Photo (a) from Navarrete (1974: fig. 2), courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation; photo (b) by Michael Love

personal adornments that mark them as privileged, parallels tendencies throughout the Olmec communication sphere while the composition demonstrates a familiarity with narrative frameworks utilized at sites like La Venta and Chalcatzingo. These characteristics underscore the fact that aesthetic ideals and artistic conventions were vital aspects of Preclassic systems of exchange.

Pijijiapan Monument 2 (Lowe 1994: fig. 7.8b; Navarrete 1974: fig. 4), an even more massive boulder sculpture that measures 6.1 m in length, upends any pat argument concerning contiguous rock surfaces, representations, and narrative flow during the Preclassic period. The Olmec-style images that spread across the surface of this great boulder – mostly isolated anthropomorphic visages, although a zoomorphic profile and a tight grouping of three standing individuals also make an appearance – do not seem to possess any narrative relationship. They are also rendered at noticeably different scales that lack internal coherence and suggest accumulation over time rather than a single artistic event. Nevertheless, what unites them all is a focus on anthropomorphic bodies, sometimes complete but more often signaled only by a disembodied head.

Other contemporaneous monuments located much further to the southeast in El Salvador point to a similar disdain for interrelated compositional fields and scalar relationships in a single sculpture. Chalchuapa Monument 12, also known as the Las Victorias boulder, lacks any archaeological context that would aid in assigning it to a temporal period, but it can be stylistically dated to the Middle Preclassic period (Fig. 2.21b) (Anderson 1978: 162, figs. 7–10; Parsons 1986: fig. 4).⁵⁷ Stanley Boggs (1950: 407) suggested that the four figures carved on the various sides of the boulder with “little apparent regard to minor irregularities of the surface” might pertain to a courtly scene centered on a single seated figure. But he also acknowledged that the obvious differences in scale between the figures might just as well point to their creation at different times and/or by different hands. One of the individuals (visible in the photo in Fig. 2.21b) stands above a horizontal design that functions as a ground line and indicates some familiarity with the conventions of compositional fields employed in other regions.

A stela-like monument from Tiltepec, a large site with more than seventy mounds just east of Tonalá, Chiapas, also probably dates to the Middle Preclassic period (Fig. 2.22) (Clark and Hodgson 2007–2008: 66–67; Milbrath 1979: 27–28, fig. 51; Navarrete 1959, 1974: 10). The central figure of the Tiltepec monument wears a tall headdress comparable to, although less towering than, that displayed by the figure on La Venta Stela 2



Figure 2.22 Monument from Tiltepec. Photo by Caitlin Earley

(Fig. 2.11d). Flanking him are secondary individuals rendered in profile, barely discernible due to weathering. The relief carving of the Tiltepec monument is not nearly as deep as that of La Venta Stela 2, nor do the secondary figures hover in mid-air like those on the Gulf Coast monument. Yet the compositions invite comparison: each privileges a frontal figure, carved in high relief, whose body extends from the base to the top of the monument and is framed by secondary figures in profile. As with other monuments from the Pacific slope region, the Tiltepec sculpture confirms a certain amount of exchange with the Olmec region concerning norms for the sculptural representation and organization of human bodies.⁵⁸

There was a significantly less sustained focus on the human form in the Middle Preclassic Guatemalan Highlands. At the site of Naranjo, which was the largest polity in the Valley of Guatemala before the rise of Kaminaljuyu, more than twenty plain stelae, many paired with altars, were erected in three rows within the main plaza (Arroyo 2007a, b; Arroyo et al. 2007; Pereira 2008; Pereira et al. 2007).⁵⁹ Only one of the monuments reveals vestiges of a carved human form (Arroyo 2010: fig. 5.15). Yet, as I discuss in Chapter 3, hundreds of small, ceramic figurines portraying human bodies were found in association with the South Platform of the site (Arroyo 2010; Linares 2009: 117; Linares and Arroyo 2008: 83). This disparity is startling: although figurines portraying humans were a ubiquitous aspect of ritual behavior at Naranjo, the stone monuments eschew figuration almost completely.



Figure 2.23 Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 9. Photo courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project

Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 9 (Fig. 2.23), which portrays a human figure in a dynamic pose, was found in a cache in Kaminaljuyu Mound C-III-6 that dates to between 500 and 300 BC and included plain basalt columns, fragmentary pedestal sculptures, ceramic vessels, and a variety of greenstone objects (Parsons 1986: 23, fig. 5; Shook 1951: 240–244; Shook and Popenoe de Hatch 1999: 297).⁶⁰ The contorted posture and lack of clothing of the individual on Sculpture 9 led scholars to suggest he represented a dancer or captive. More recently, Lucia Henderson (2013: 307–309) argued that the imagery – particularly the curling conch shell-like form that emanates from the open mouth of the figure’s upturned face – compares closely to Middle Preclassic scenes, like those from Chalcatzingo, in which powerful sovereigns asserted

their dominion over natural forces and agricultural productivity by invoking an iconography linked to utterances, breath, exhalations, clouds, moisture, and rain. Henderson (2013: 413) cautioned, however, that whether the Sculpture 9 figure represents a king, a deity, or a personified supernatural force remains unclear: both humans and gods speak and sing in the art of Kaminaljuyu. Sculpture 9 exudes both tradition and innovation. The figure clearly relates to other, striding individuals throughout the Middle Preclassic corpus and is incorporated into a compositional field that wraps around the prismatic faces of the monument, but his exaggerated utterance or exhalation is novel.⁶¹

In the Middle Preclassic Maya Lowlands, the human form was materialized only seldomly in the form of monumental stone sculpture. It does, however, make rare appearances in architectural decoration. In Building B at Holmul, whose first phase dates to c. 400 BC, vestiges of a human face rendered in a graffiti-like form, as well as handprints made with red paint, are preserved on the temple’s walls (Estrada-Belli 2011: 93). The structure was also decorated with large stucco masks that, while focused on mythical zoomorphic creatures, include anthropomorphic representations. The gaping mouth of the zoomorph on the façade of Holmul Building B-1st emits a human figure possessing wrinkled cheeks, while human skulls, modeled in stucco, flank the creature’s mouth (Estrada-Belli 2011: fig. 5.12). Francisco Estrada-Belli (2011: 95–96) interpreted the scene as one in which an old man, perhaps a death god, emerges from a sacred mountain, personified by the zoomorphic creature. He linked this iconography to that found throughout the Olmec communication sphere in which beings enter portals and communicate with ancestors or the supernatural realm. The façade of Holmul Building B-1st anticipates later developments in the Maya Lowlands, in which artists took increasing advantage of architectural façades for the expression of figural representations.⁶²

Discussion

The title of de la Fuente’s *Los Hombres de Piedra* captures well the formal and theoretical emphasis of Early and Middle Preclassic sculpture. The objects sculpted in these early years of Mesoamerican history display a sustained focus on the human form and also attest to the conceptualization of formal solutions that were developed and shared throughout many regions. Much of the sculpture was conceived as monumental in the full sense of the word: it invited attention, prioritized permanence, and inspired visual engagement. But the extant data pose the

question: Who was the audience for these works of art portraying humans? Who was supposed to notice them and, presumably, internalize their meanings?

The locus of sculpture within the sacred precincts of many polities, in close proximity to administrative structures, kingly palaces, and privileged residential zones, points to the fact that elite viewership was one central goal. But the grand scale of some of the objects suggests that they were intended to engage viewers from vantage points that were not necessarily proximal. At La Venta, for example, Monuments 52–54, which depict enormous crouching individuals wearing exaggerated headdresses, range in height from 2.6 to 3.8 m and were situated on Structure D-7 at the southern end of one of the main ceremonial – and functional – approaches into the heart of the site (Fig. 2.24) (González Lauck 2010: 134–135). Intimate access to Structure D-7, or the Complex C acropolis where monuments like Stela 5 with its narrative imagery were erected (Fig. 2.11a), may have been limited to elites. But surely viewers of any rank who moved throughout the community or its vast central plaza could marvel at objects from a distance, even if the details escaped them. Their sheer novelty, at the very least, must have made an impact. Size mattered during the Preclassic period but so too did details, sometimes rendered at a reduced scale that demanded visual proximity and, with it, likely, a certain social status (Gillespie 2008a). These opposing formal agendas – monuments designed to be large or small, for distant or proximal viewing – are ripe with friction. Sculpture became a powerful venue through which these conflicts were materialized and mediated. Sculpture was generative, in

other words, an aesthetic platform through which a conduct for social engagement was encoded and delimited.

Monuments clearly played a vital role in the urban programming of Preclassic polities, but were also scattered more widely, albeit sporadically, across the landscape of Mesoamerica by the Middle Preclassic period. Christopher Pool (2010: 109, fig. 5.6) argued that the colossal Cobata head, situated at the divide between the lower Papaloapan and Tepango valleys, served as a territorial marker of the Tres Zapotes polity. It also harkened back to the other monumental heads that marked Group 1 and the Nestepe Group of the site proper, creating intervisual connections between center and periphery. The Olmec-style figure carved onto a rock outcrop in Xoc, Chiapas, in the municipality of Ocosingo near the confluence of an immense river system, is another case in point (Fig. 2.25). It was carved on a rocky outcrop to the northwest of the Preclassic community of Xoc, where it looked out over a stream-fed zone of fertile land, likely cultivated by ancient agriculturalists (Ekholm-Miller 1973: 6, fig. 3).⁶³ Its relatively remote location in the eastern highlands of Chiapas did not, however, preclude the monument from participating in Olmec iconographic and stylistic conventions, from the features of the zoomorphic individual to the bundle cradled in his arms.⁶⁴ So, too, its materiality was intended to guarantee its permanence as a fixed, durable feature of the landscape, moored to the earth's stony core (Clark et al. 2010: 10; Stuart 2010: 286–287).⁶⁵ Early and Middle Preclassic monuments, whether erected in site centers or situated



Figure 2.24 La Venta Monument 52. Photo by author



Figure 2.25 Rock carving at Xoc, Chiapas. Photo from Ekholm-Miller (1973: fig. 8), courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation

on more remote rocky outcrops, shared a common denominator: the human body.

The resilience of these human representations, rendered in stone, must have been awe inspiring; they reflected back, to viewers, human bodies that would outlast those composed of flesh and blood. Yet this apparent fixation on crafting durable representations of humans seems at odds with the ancient processes of destruction that are equally prevalent in the corpus of monuments. Grove's (1981: 49) and Angulo's (1987: 155; Grove and Angulo 1987: 126) insistence that these acts of mutilation be recognized as reverential in nature, rather than iconoclastic, is fully warranted. They were also intimately connected, as I argue in Chapter 5, to patterns of ritualized use and breakage that extended to smaller, clay representations of humans. Depictions of the human body, rendered in stone or clay, were the locus of both representational *and* destructive acts during the Preclassic period.

To be meaningful, representations of humans needed to effectively convey or embody some aspect of what it meant to be human. The corpus of monumental sculpture from the Early and Middle Preclassic illustrates a number of norms that guided human representation. There is a consistent emphasis on the head, whether attached to a body or not. Faces were often subtly modeled. Mouths were viewed as expressive features, used to convey exhalations and utterances. Bodies were viewed as aesthetically flexible: they could be rendered with a life-like volume or, at other times, flattened onto a single pictorial plane. My guess is that these formal devices developed in tandem with intellectual exploration of the significance of human representation, of the ontological interrelationships between actual human bodies and representations thereof.

But *whose* bodies were memorialized in monumental compositions? Most often, they appear to have been elite bodies. But a better answer emerges if one considers who and what were *not* portrayed in the corpus of Early and Middle Preclassic monumental art. There are, for example, no images of individuals engaged in construction, or fishing, or weaving, or flint knapping. There are no pastoral scenes of agriculturalists. In fact, it appears to be a ruler who takes credit for the arrival of rain in the narrative sequence of Chalcatzingo Monuments 11, 8, 14, 15, 6, 7, and 1 (Figs. 2.14 and 2.15). Even if one asserts that the staff-wielding and briskly walking individuals on Chalcatzingo Monument 2 (Angulo 1987: fig. 10.13; Grove 1987: fig. 9.9; Tate 2012: 132) wield planting sticks rather than weapons, they are hardly dressed for a day's work in the field. Instead, they wear elaborate headdresses and regalia, and possess masks that allude to superhuman capacities.

Early and Middle Preclassic representations of bodies display the capacity to encode social difference, both through regalia and a suite of formal devices. Viewers of all sorts surely came to understand the significance of whose body was taller, most volumetric, most dynamic. Many of these stone bodies deliberately created a distinction between the regal individuals portrayed and most onlookers, whom the archaeological record indicates lacked equal access to comparable regalia and finery. Scholars have long recognized that the sculptural programs of Early and Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica were well suited to the needs of rulers, who asserted their exalted social status and relationship with the gods (Grove and Gillespie 1992).⁶⁶

Early and Middle Preclassic monuments were also part of a larger "aesthetic of authority" or "ethos of nobility" (McAnany 2013: 232). Many of the sculptures featuring elite bodies probably functioned as "concretized presentations of bodily ideals and standards of comportment" (Bachand et al. 2003: 245; also see Coe 1989 and Gillespie 1999). And details mattered. For example, John Clark and Arlene Colman (2014) recently explored, in exacting detail, the shifting significance of earpools both in representational terms and in the archaeological record. At San Lorenzo, for example, ten colossal heads at San Lorenzo wear ear ornaments; by contrast, small ceramic figurines from the site lack them. The evidence suggests, they concluded, that sumptuary rules were in place during the Early Preclassic period at San Lorenzo, which would give way to new "aesthetics of authority" in later periods and different regions:

[W]e propose that persons of influence in the San Lorenzo polity were so interested in ear ornaments they co-opted their use and promoted the discontinuance of such items among those once privileged to wear them. They created an artificial scarcity and thereby elevated the symbolic importance of earpools. By San Lorenzo times earpools appear to have become markers of class. Many other archaeological indicators support the inference that class societies existed by this time. . . . These more complex social arrangements impacted many issues of personal presentation, ornamentation, dress, status, and agency, as reflected in shifting practices of ear decoration. (Clark and Colman 2014: 184–185)

Mary Helms (1994: 58), in a consideration of lower Central America, argued that "public expression of high rank and status via regalia and special forms of etiquette may have preceded actual authority, may in fact have been a necessary precondition for the acceptance of such authority or at least significantly facilitated it." She invoked Michael Allen's (1984: 36) work in Melanesia,

which demonstrated that “a high level of specification of insignia and ritual procedures constitutes a kind of orthodoxy or idiom of legitimacy, access to which can then be controlled by men of influence.” These ideas dovetail nicely with Baines and Yoffee’s “high culture” model, described in [Chapter 1](#). Many of the most enduring symbols of Mesoamerican high culture were visualized and codified through the corpus of Early and Middle Preclassic art, through the ways in which artists grappled with the complex relationship between figuration and actual human bodies. In order to produce more than an echo chamber, however, elite assertions of privilege needed to be seen, experienced, and internalized by more than just other elites. A whole range of society – kin, acquaintances, trading partners, strangers, and even enemies – was, I would guess, the targeted audience of monumental representations.

The eventual proliferation of sculpture across Mesoamerica suggests that the individuals who commissioned these monuments recognized their power, utility, and effectiveness. While one might argue that stone sculpture was, even throughout the Middle Preclassic period, experimental, it proved to be a successful experiment, and one that continued to unfold. By the close of the Middle Preclassic, human bodies began to be paired with hieroglyphic inscriptions. We see this very clearly in the Danzantes program of Monte Albán where text graces both skin and adjacent surfaces, or on La Venta Monument 13 where glyph-like elements were paired with a body moving in space. Sculpture also began to engage more fully with time. The increasingly narrative imagery of monuments like La Venta Stela 5, Pijijiapan Monument 1, or Chalcatzingo Monument 2 points to a sophisticated understanding of the potential of stone surfaces to accommodate temporal sequences or stories, which expanded across their pictorial planes. Such imagery was moored to an understanding of time’s journeys and, importantly, humans’ roles within them.

Humans were vital to Early and Middle Preclassic narrative compositions, in my estimation. But narrativity was by no means uniform. At Chalcatzingo, interacting human bodies flow across the vast surfaces of boulders. At La Venta, as at Pijijiapan, multiple actors engage with each other in monoscenic compositions carved on boulders or stelae. At Takalik Abaj, on the other hand, monuments focus on single individuals, bereft of companions, whose gestures nevertheless suggest action or engagement with their surroundings. The anthropomorphic water deity on Takalik Abaj Monument 64 ([Fig. 2.18c](#) and [d](#)), for example, hardly exists in a vacuum of solitude or narrative isolation but, instead, seems fully engaged with the irrefutably wet environment in which the

sculpture was positioned, which was home to both some of the earliest residential structures in the community *and* seasonal inundations.

Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 9 ([Fig. 2.23](#)) poses a similar challenge to any overly generalized or reductive definition of what constituted a Middle Preclassic narrative framework. Again, a single individual appears on the basalt column. But to suggest that this monument lacks a narrative, using the broadest definition of “narrative” as a form of storytelling, is to overlook the fact that the imagery alludes to a sequence of events, some causal relationship between the figure’s transportation on the back of a saurian beast and his exhalation, poetically rendered as a conch-shell scroll.

Subtle differences in the way human bodies were contextualized within pictorial and narrative frameworks are important to recognize, as they reveal ongoing processes of artistic exploration. With Early Preclassic San Lorenzo Monument 14 ([Fig. 2.1](#)), multiple nodes of time or different parts of a story line were incorporated into a single monument: the high-relief figure in the central niche – presumably a ruler – occupies a space that is distinct from that of the profile individuals rendered on either side of the monument (Tate 2012: 124). But, as I noted above, this composition by no means facilitated any active engagement between the figures. This changed dramatically during the Middle Preclassic period, when compositions began to incorporate multiple individuals in direct narrative engagement with each other.

Yet the gatherings of individuals on Middle Preclassic monuments rarely provide much detail concerning their surroundings. As Milbrath (1979: 32) perceived, even the most interactive scenes silhouette figures “against a flat background or open or negative space.” In few cases are there contextual details that enable us to discern where the interactions took place, although, again, there are exceptions to the rule. Angulo (1987: 136) suggested that the plants marking the corners of the quatrefoils carved on Chalcatzingo Monuments 1 ([Fig. 2.15b](#)), 9, and 13 probably reference the many bromeliads that adhere to the fissures of rocks at the site itself. The plants reflect the natural landscape and, perhaps more significantly, situate the supernatural quatrefoil portals within a recognizable, immediate, and fundamentally local space. Likewise, with Takalik Abaj Monument 64 ([Fig. 2.18c](#) and [d](#)), the S-scrolls reference the aquatic environment in which the monument was situated. But, beyond these exceptions, the contexts of Middle Preclassic individuals are rarely specified, existing instead in a space that lacks details of particular geographies, spaces, or places. Their bodies, in and of themselves, become the organizing principle of the composition.

Clarity is also sometimes lacking, in these early monuments, concerning the specific nature of the individuals portrayed, whether fully human, divine, or some combination thereof. This situation led de la Fuente (1994: 217), as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, to suggest that the frontier between the human and divine coalesced in the human form, which served as a bridge between the supernatural and natural worlds. The Xoc relief carving (Fig. 2.25) (Ekholm-Miller 1973: 2, figs. 8–15) illustrates this well. It portrays an anthropomorph with distinctly feline features, including clawed feet and a zoomorphic countenance, whose striding posture puts it in dialogue with naturalistically rendered individuals on many Middle Preclassic monuments. I would guess that this composite identity – part human, part animal, part divine – was intentional, the result of deliberate artistic choices. But, as the next chapter emphasizes, such blurred boundaries were not solely the domain of monumental art. There are any number of small-scale ceramic figurines, which were accessible to people from across the social spectrum, which likewise inhabit a realm that exists somewhere between nature and the imagination. This is noteworthy. During the Early and Middle Preclassic periods, representational boundaries between the human and the divine, between historical individuals and mythic characters, were not only porous but also surprisingly democratic. Granted, there are stark differences in scale and medium between the objects, but the fact is that people from all walks of life, regardless of rank, appear to have had ready access to objects – at least ceramic ones, that is – that engaged with a suite of ontological possibilities.

Pasztory commented on the naturalistic or illusionistic qualities of Olmec monuments that portray humans. The ability to render naturalistically the likeness of a human, she posited, constituted “a form of mysterious and miraculous knowledge and therefore also a form of power. Such power belonged to the ruler and his circle and was not available to others” (Pasztory 2005: 186). Her suggestion overlooks, as Chapters 3 and 4 make explicit, the rich traditions of human representation that characterize small, clay figurines, which are equally illusionistic. During the Preclassic period, the domains of likeness and illusionism were not solely those of rulers and elites. The story of Preclassic representation must, in order to be complete *and* unbiased, take into consideration the entire realm of creative productivity, not only that of the “ruler and his circle.”⁶⁷

Questions of naturalism and illusionism call to mind the thorny issue of portraiture. The colossal heads of San Lorenzo blend elements of portraiture – individualized expressions and elements of costume – with stylized or conventionalized facial features.⁶⁸ This interesting tension between formulaic and individuating attributes is present, as well, in the monumental artistic programs of the Old World. For example, in her discussion of ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian art, Irene Winter (2010: 84) noted that occasional physiognomic traits existed alongside idealized features:

Thus Gudea’s chin is common to all of his images, just as the nose of Nofar, an official of the Egyptian Old Kingdom, identifies him ..., the rest of the image being a typically canonical and idealized Egyptian image.

Winter (2010: 87) suggested that the formulaic features in these works grew out of a desire to portray the bodies of rulers with “perfect proportions.” In Sumerian art, she argued, a ruler “would be expected to be perfect in form and outstanding in size, such that he would stand out amongst the people.” Outsize scale and perfection would call attention to him among the gods, who would “take notice of him and select him to rule” according to a twelfth-century Babylonian text that “made explicit ... the relationship between appearance and public attention” (Winter 2010: 87). While, alas, no comparably illuminating texts exist for the ancient Olmec, one can nevertheless discern a unique tension between individualization and idealization from the inception of monumental art in the Early Preclassic period. Gillespie (1999: 245) argued that Olmec art “transcended the individual and his unique identity.” Even when modeled after living individuals, she maintained, the monuments were imbued with references to ancestors, lineages, and actions that long outlasted any single life.

These tensions would continue to play a significant role in determining the course of monumental art concerned with the human form throughout the Preclassic period and beyond. They haunt, as well, the corpus of figurines, which provided an especially productive outlet for wrestling with the complex relationships between figuration, individuality, and social collectivity. The following chapter, in many ways, is a corrective for this one: it moves away from the privileged realm of monuments and elites and considers the ways in which human representation played an equally – if not more – powerful role for people from all walks of life.

Early and Middle Preclassic Figuration in Clay

This chapter, like the preceding one, provides an overview of Early and Middle Preclassic period figuration, although in this case focused on objects of a very different size and medium: the small, hand-modeled ceramic figurines that demonstrate an equally sustained engagement with the human form. I address figurines produced throughout Mesoamerica during this period, reserving in-depth discussion of the extensive corpus of figurines from the Middle Preclassic site of La Blanca for the [following chapter](#).

Ceramic figurines are abundant in the archaeological record, far more so than their monumental stone counterparts, and, because of this, provide a robust inventory with which we can explore more fully the forms and significance of human representation. Although animals and biologically impossible creatures do make appearances in the corpus of Preclassic figurines, most focus on the human body and, as such, express ideas about the human form, human identity, and social relationships (Blomster 2009: 119; Lesure 1997). Figurines, Ian Kuijt and Meredith Chesson (2007: 211) argued, represent durable representations of “the personal and social body” and can “tell us about the attitudes to the body of those societies that produced them” (Scarre 2007: 18).¹ Every bit as much as their monumental counterparts, ceramic figurines privilege “the concept of the body as an organizing metaphor” (Talalay 1993: 50).

Yet ironically, and in spite of an array of evidence, we are not entirely sure how ceramic figurines functioned in the ancient past, where they were used (although we do know where they wound up), who made them, who had access to them, or what the intended goals of their making and deployment were. The best guess of many scholars is that Mesoamerican figurines served any number of purposes, in any number of different settings.

Any single figurine likely encapsulated multiple aspects of identity, one or more of which was emphasized – or deemphasized – depending on the context and circumstances of use. At times, the interpretations proffered by scholars for figurines from a single site or region diverge considerably (R. Joyce 2009: 421). This variability is both frustrating and telling: it speaks to the fact that there are limits associated with the evidence and what it can tell us, but it also highlights the ongoing processes of discovery and methodological inquiry that characterize figurine studies today.

In many ways, the diverse forms and contexts of figurines from Early and Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica mandate multiple approaches for understanding their roles. By the same token, their sheer numbers remind us that, regardless of the shortcomings in our understandings, they were vital to the social fabric of Preclassic Mesoamerica, a key part of routinized and repetitive practices across the socioeconomic spectrum. At the heart of this significance, no doubt, was their emphatic emphasis on human bodies. As Blomster (2011: 116) phrased it, Preclassic figurines are a material index of “the great interest these people had in bodies.” They were also one way in which Early and Middle Preclassic peoples grappled with the “ontological dimensions of being human and representing the human” (Bailey 2005: 22). Their very materiality may have carried significance: the crafting and firing of a figurine necessitated the transformation of clay from a natural, malleable, and perishable material into a permanent one (Bailey 2005: 5). Clay also requires a fundamentally constructive and additive process, unlike the reductive process of stone carving. Figurines, Joyce (2002: 603) asserted, invite “phenomenological question[s] of how the practice of shaping malleable material (clay) into representational form served to embed particular senses of the human body as culturally shaped in those making and using figurines.”

Early studies by George Vaillant (1930, 1931, 1935) were instrumental for establishing chronological and stylistic sequences for figurines in Mesoamerica. Vaillant’s classificatory scheme was predicated on methods used to analyze and seriate ceramic wares and incorporated shared data points such as paste, temper, and slip, as well as technological, stylistic, and iconographic criteria (Faust and Halperin 2009: 6–7). Michael Long (2011: 17, 44–45) noted that Vaillant paid particular attention to the heads of figurines, focusing on their stylistic elaboration as a key diagnostic feature, an emphasis still apparent in modern figurine scholarship and one that resonates with Mesoamerican understandings of the

significance of the head as “the essential manifestation of the body” (Houston et al. 2006: 68). Finely detailed figurine heads are also “time sensitive,” asserted Richard Lesure (2005: 247), in a way that less elaborated torsos and bodies are not.

Taxonomic classification systems for figurines are both a blessing and a curse, as Philip Drucker intimated in his 1952 study of the figurines from La Venta. He quipped, tongue in cheek, that in defining new figurine types he had committed “certain sins against the systematic taxonomy” originally established for the site (Drucker 1952: 133). His confession rings true. The corpus of figurines expands with each excavation season, but analysis can be constrained by rigid taxonomic systems whose inflexibility is poorly suited to accommodating new – and sometimes surprising – specimens. Such predicaments are not unique to the New World, and, in fact, Meskell (2007: 138) reported that the database conceived for the corpus of figurines from Çatalhöyük, Turkey, “did not simply involve archiving the collections, but engaged a critical rethinking of analytical and interpretive categories oriented towards a more integrative approach to figurine studies” (also see Ucko 1968). Even with the most careful consideration, she nevertheless cautioned, “the specificities of our categorical understandings are unlikely to mesh with the ancients” (Meskell 2007: 148). Mary Voigt (2007: 168) made a similar assertion, acknowledging that our modern typologies for figurine analysis are an imperfect attempt to bring order to an ancient, real world, which surely did not fall into neat categories.

Whether forced to comply with taxonomic schemes or not, figurines occupy an uneasy space in scholarship. Drucker (1952) included ceramic figurines from La Venta in a chapter titled “The Ceramics of La Venta,” which focused predominantly on pottery of various forms and considered questions of taxonomy, relative distribution, and stratigraphy. By contrast, he placed *greenstone* figurines in a chapter titled “The Sculptor’s Art,” which also included monumental art. Joyce Marcus (2009: 25) warned that simply elevating ceramic figurines to the level of “art” was hardly a solution if done at the expense of their archaeological and social contexts. So, too, maintenance of taxonomic boundaries based on medium (stone or ceramic), function, and social context (private or public, commoner or elite) run the risk of impeding, rather than inspiring, more conceptually based, synthetic analyses.

In the last few decades, the pendulum has swung dramatically away from the days in which Mesoamerican figurines were relegated to appendices or described as “minor arts” (Cook de Leonard 1971; Piña Chan 1971).² Mesoamerican figurines now constitute a

significant subject for study in and of themselves, fueled by a methodologically rich body of literature that stretches well beyond the confines of Mesoamerica (see Scarre 2007).³ As Lesure (2017: 41) put it, today’s global figurine scholarship benefits from a “rhetorical context that is necessarily comparative.” Some limitations do, however, persist. Although many excavation reports illustrate representative figurine types, the vast majority of figurines never see the light of publication. In his conclusion to the *New World Figurine Project*, Terry Stocker (1991a: 145) confessed that many figurines included in that volume were published for the first time, in spite of having been excavated many decades earlier. He also bemoaned the often very poor quality of the illustrations and photos, declaring them “almost unusable.”

Before I turn to the figurine evidence from Early and Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica, a few caveats and clarifications are in order. This chapter by no means provides a thorough discussion of the data, whose extraordinary abundance defies neat synopsis. Some numbers underscore this: at the site of Chalcatzingo alone, more than 8,000 figurines have been recovered (Cyphers 1993: 212). Obviously, such vast quantities from even a single center illustrate the difficulties – perhaps, even, the impossibility – of providing any neat summary of the evidence from across Mesoamerica.

I also need to clarify how, as an art historian, I am thinking about figurines. Given that the word “sculpture,” in modern usage, refers to objects that have been deliberately shaped in some way, figurines surely qualify for this title. That said, the goal of this book is not to redefine figurines as sculpture, or even as “art.” Such a task would be, as Marcus (2009: 25) reminded us, misguided. Meskell (2017: 17–18), building off of W. J. T. Mitchell’s (1996: 82) “What Do Pictures *Really* Want?,” went even further, asserting that clay figurines “want neither to be leveled into a ‘history of images’ nor elevated into a ‘history of art’ but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities.” What I am advocating for in this book, notwithstanding its organizational limitations and taxonomic crutches, is intensified scrutiny of the dynamic relationships that existed between diverse figural objects in Preclassic Mesoamerica. The larger story of human figuration, in my opinion, hinges on it.

Issues of Scale

The issue of scale is central to the study of figurines. A tiny catalogue, a mere 9.5 × 11.5 cm in size, titled *Primitive Miniatures*, illustrated a number of figurines within its

pages and addressed the etymology of the language we use to talk about miniaturized things:

Although in today's usage the word miniature is often etymologically associated with minute, it is actually derived from the Latin *minium*, meaning red lead. This was the medium used by artists in ancient and medieval Europe to illustrate manuscripts in which the images were made in small scale to fit the limited space available for them on the page. In its first definition a miniature is thus an image whose small dimensions are dictated by its structured use as an illustrative embellishment of a text. The drawing medium named the type of manuscript illumination which in turn became associated with any object having dimensional proportions significantly smaller than the prime object which it represents. (Maurer 1979: 5–6)

Mesoamerican figurines do, indeed, appear to represent miniaturized versions of “prime objects,” those prime objects being humans in the vast majority of cases. They, like figurines from around the globe, lend credence to Protagoras's proclamation that “humanity is the measure of all things” (Foxhall 2015: 1). But in Mesoamerica, even though human bodies were the prime objects, the processes of miniaturizing them appear to have engaged with more than one simple “smaller than life-size” category. Even within a single community, miniaturization operates on a sliding scale: comparison of two disembodied figurine arms from Middle Preclassic La Blanca demonstrates that there were multiple permutations in play at any one time (Fig. 3.1).



Figure 3.1 Comparison of two limbs from same La Blanca excavation unit. Photo courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

Perhaps a more salient question is: What does miniaturization enable? Throughout much of the world, miniaturization assured that figurines were readily portable, capable of being utilized in varied contexts. It also infers, however, that they were best suited to more intimate settings, which accommodated the sort of proximal scrutiny they invite. Bailey (2005: 85) argued that, in more private settings, figurines enabled “people to engage, display, discuss and handle issues of identity, status, inter-personal, inter-group differentiation in comfortable and unthreatening ways.” Numerous scholars have called attention to the fact that miniaturization absorbs people into smaller worlds. Alfred Gell (1992: 47) viewed miniatures as things of enchantment. Miniaturization also, Bailey (2005: 38) stressed, inspires intimacy and promotes touch, an observation that holds true for Mesoamerican figurines. They were scaled in a way to be comfortably held in the hand, rotated and turned so that all surfaces could be viewed, including the backs and sides (Fig. 1.2). Figurines “take the gaze to the third dimension,” asserted Bailey (2005: 145), adding that “[i]f the gaze is a power relationship over the visual field, then the caress is a power relationship (and a much stronger one) over the tactile field.”

In Mesoamerica, an attention to all surfaces of figurines, not just their fronts, is apparent (Fig. 3.2). Many reveal exquisite craftsmanship and remind viewers of the technical difficulty, and time involved, in rendering detail at such a minute scale. Their craftsmanship, tactility, and diminutive scale were undoubtedly central to their success and duration in Mesoamerica. Figurines sat at the nexus of what must have been a provocative “intertextuality of materiality,” according to Lin Foxhall (2015: 1). They could be grasped in one's hand, rotated, and scrutinized to reveal, in miniature form, the features, expressions, and costuming of the humans represented. This process of engagement was a dynamic one, Foxhall maintained: “Miniatures epitomize, echo and reverberate meanings captured in and associated with other objects, while creating new meanings of their own, which potentially enrich and alter both the miniature itself and its prototype.”

Unlike monumental sculpture, figurines do not require humans to move around them; instead, humans move and rotate the figurines. This fact led Bailey to assert that humans are empowered by comparison to the miniature. Miniaturization enlarges the viewer and underscores that “human scale matters most and dictates all spatial relationships” (Bailey 2005: 33). Miniaturization also entails choices, the selection of some features and the exclusion of others. In this sense, miniatures differ from models, which “strive to reproduce an original in a factual manner” (Bailey 2005: 29, 112). Miniatures do not “seek



Figure 3.2 La Blanca figurine, showing modeled details on all sides. From the Edwin Shook collection, Universidad del Valle. Photos courtesy of the Department of Archaeology, Universidad del Valle, Guatemala

for accuracy in representation” but, instead, engage in processes of abstraction and compression. Miniaturization “concentrates and distills what is normal in peoples’ routine day-to-day activities and thoughts and then produces a denser expression of a part of that reality” (Bailey 2005: 32; also see R. Joyce 2009: 411–414). Bailey’s points are important: miniaturization involves more than a diminution in scale. It necessitates carefully determined processes of selection, omission, and compression. Omissions, somewhat paradoxically, are often at the heart of a miniature’s power: their absence forces viewers to complete the object and draw inferences, which are unique to the individual doing the viewing. Each person draws from their own “beliefs, understandings, interests, backgrounds, and desires” ensuring that the inferences are “almost limitless” (Bailey 2005: 32).

A Preclassic Figured World

The term “figurine” can mean many things. Blomster (2002: 171) observed that “[a]ttempts to apply only one interpretation to figurines as an artifact class homogenize the wide variety of objects classified etically by archaeologists as ‘figures’ and neglect the multivalent emic meanings dependent on the specific audience, temporal, and spatial context.” To be clear, the majority of figurines that I address in this chapter are small, solid, hand-modeled, clay objects. At Middle Preclassic La Blanca, where I have worked with the site’s extensive corpus of figurines for many years, most heads and bodies were formed by modeling solid blocks of clay; heads and bodies were then assembled and fired as a unit. We find most figurines there in fragmentary condition, in the form

of either disembodied heads or decapitated bodies. Only infrequently do we find heads still attached to bodies. Every so often we find small hollow heads, but our best guess is that they, too, were at one time affixed to solid bodies. As a general rule across Mesoamerica, hollow construction and firing techniques accommodate greater size; firing a large, solid figurine would result in cracking and breakage. Yet, at La Blanca, many hollow heads are the same size as small solid ones (a point to which I return in the following chapter), which has forced us to conclude that size was not the sole motivation for utilizing hollow construction techniques.⁴

Although in this book I am focused on Preclassic figurines crafted from clay, it is important to recognize that Mesoamericans took advantage of many materials to create human representations, some exceedingly fragile. Friar Alonso Ponce, in the 1580s at Atoyaque, Colima, documented the creation of mold-made figurines from salt (Andrews 1983: 53; Ponce 1873: II: 120–121). Friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1950–1982, bk. 3: 5–6) described figurines formed of amaranth dough in the likenesses of deities in New Spain, as did Friar Diego Durán (1971: 203), who also documented the use of maize and chia (see Morán 2016: 42). An anthropomorphic idol crafted from different seeds was included in an inventory of objects from Mexico sent to Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria in Munich in 1572 (Toorians 1994: 65). Working in the ethnographic present, Elsie Clews Parsons (1936: 71) recorded the use of wax figurines in the Zapotec towns of Zaachila and Mitla through the twentieth century, where they were employed to appeal to the saints for children. Frederick Starr (1900: 83) described the use of figurines crafted from wood, cloth, clay, and metal in the Otomí and

Huastec regions, and Alan Sandstrom (2009) described the anthropomorphic figures made of paper still made today in the Huasteca Veracruzana (Sandstrom 2009). Rare archaeological evidence also survives: Jules Vasquez (2013: 54) reported a figurine found in an Early Classic tomb at Santa Rita Corozal made from a “resin poured in a mold.” The Early Preclassic wooden busts from El Manatí (Ortiz and Rodríguez 1994) and the copal figurines found at the Aztec Templo Mayor (Victoria Lona 2004) attest to the creative potential of an array of perishable materials. So, too, Bishop Diego de Landa’s (Tozzer 1941: 108; also see Prufer et al. 2003) description from sixteenth-century Yucatán of a large quantity of “idols” of “clay and wood of different kinds, large and small, in quantity, according to what is believed, of almost a million of them” offers a poignant reminder of the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record that only rarely, in Mesoamerica, preserves more ephemeral objects.⁵

Early and Middle Preclassic ceramic figurines were an integral component of a “figured world,” which included stone sculpture, greenstone objects, and an array of other objects we can only imagine. The expression “figured world,” which I use because it effectively highlights the pervasiveness of figural representations throughout much of Early and Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica, is borrowed from Dorothy Holland, William Lachicotte, Debra Skinner, and Carole Cain’s (1998) study of identity and agency. They used it to refer to a cultural realm “peopled by characters from collective imaginings” who “take shape within and grant shape to the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances, and artifacts” (Holland et al. 1998: 51). During the Early and Middle Preclassic periods, people participated within a figured world constituted less (at least in terms of quantity) by monumental sculpture than by the multitude of figurines that provided ready access to human representations. Granted, not all people used or had access to figurines, and there are communities that lack them completely. But we can conclude that the making and use of figurines generated meaning throughout much of Mesoamerica. A social world was both produced and reproduced through the practices of the people who crafted and utilized figurines. Bailey (2007: 117; also see 2005: 197–204) stated this well for the Balkan Neolithic, arguing:

Neolithic perspectives on society found their most powerful manifestations in the repeated, daily, visual experience of people seeing representations of the human body in the miniature, durable, three-dimensional form of anthropomorphic figurines... The Balkan Neolithic was a particular corporeal politics of being, and figurines were at the core.

One could readily, and accurately, substitute “Early and Middle Preclassic” for “Balkan Neolithic” in this passage. Entire regions of Early and Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica were saturated with abundant and readily accessible miniature human representations. In order to trace the contours of this “figured world,” I begin with Early and Middle Preclassic figurines from areas beyond the Pacific slope of Mesoamerica, eventually turning to a focus on southeastern Mesoamerica and, in the following chapter, the site of La Blanca in particular.

Early Preclassic Figurines beyond the Pacific Slope

San Lorenzo

Coe and Diehl (1980: 259–260) expressed surprise at the quantity (747) of the mostly fragmentary figurines at San Lorenzo, which they argued were never identical.⁶ They viewed this variation as evidence that figurines represented “individual portraits rather than stylizations,” although the postures – standing, seated with legs outstretched, or seated with crossed legs – were limited. David Cheetham (2009: 155; 2010: 356) noted the lack of clothing on many Early Preclassic figurines in the Gulf Coast region, concluding that it is present on only 3 percent of the figurine torsos at San Lorenzo. Each of the many disembodied heads recovered is also unique, with some adhering to a “traditional” Olmec style (Coe and Diehl 1980: 264) that emphasized elongated bald heads, slit eyes, highly arched eyebrows, flat triangular noses, and thick frowning lips (Fig. 3.3). Others demonstrate very different head shapes and conventions for representing facial features, which Coe and Diehl (1980: 272, figs. 353–356) referred to as “non-Olmec” and suggested may have been introduced into San Lorenzo through trade. As addressed in the previous chapter, Clark and Colman (2014: 166, 175) called attention to the lack of ear ornamentation on San Lorenzo figurines, which contrasts sharply with the ornamentation displayed on stone representations at the site. They argued that these disparities between medium indicate the presence of sumptuary

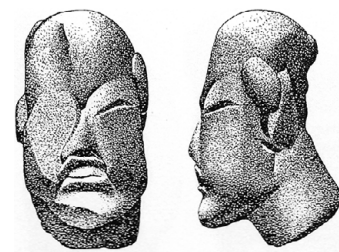


Figure 3.3 San Lorenzo Olmec style figurine. Drawing courtesy of Michael Coe

rules, which allowed elites (like those portrayed by the colossal heads) to wear types of ornamentation denied to other social classes (more broadly represented by figurines).

Questions of gender plague the corpus of San Lorenzo figurines. Coe and Diehl (1980: 260) described them as “strikingly sexless,” in contrast to Follensbee (2009: 81, 88, table 4.1), who argued for a preponderance of females based on combinations of secondary sexual characteristics and other gendered features including costume and adornment. Cheetham (2009: 157) challenged Follensbee’s conclusions, however, arguing that features she interpreted as breasts were actually well-defined pectoral muscles suggestive of the male gender.⁷

Coe and Diehl’s data indicate fluctuations in figurine density throughout the duration of occupation at San Lorenzo. During the San Lorenzo A phase, figurines made a far more frequent appearance in the archaeological record, constituting nearly 35 percent of the entire collection.⁸ Coe and Diehl (1980: 260) cautioned, however, that the original use contexts of the figurines were difficult to establish given that virtually all of their collection came from construction fill that had been obtained from household midden debris. More recently, Cyphers et al. (2006: 24) documented figurines in the sunken patio of the San Lorenzo Group E complex, an elite private ritual space that lacked a typical domestic assemblage, which were placed there along with a series of offerings that included bones, obsidian artifacts, and vessels. Such findings hint at the potentially diverse uses of figurines at Early Preclassic San Lorenzo.

El Manatí and Mayacal

At the site of El Manatí, famed for its carved wooden busts, there is an almost complete absence of clay figurines. The lack of a full domestic assemblage suggests that El Manatí was a sacred location, which sets it apart from the site of Mayacal, located 3 km away from and contemporaneous with El Manatí, where almost 600 figurine fragments were recovered from a community with habitational structures (Rodríguez and Ortiz 1997: 92). This disparity is significant and suggests that in this region during the Early Preclassic period figurines were deemed appropriate for use in settled communities but not, perhaps, at pilgrimage sites.⁹

La Joya and Tres Zapotes

Working at the site of La Joya in the Tuxtla Mountains of southern Veracruz, Phillip Arnold and Follensbee (2015: 14) described “50 isolated heads, 51 individual torsos (some with appendages), five examples that include both head and torso, and one complete figurine” in Early Preclassic assemblages. Figurines were crafted from local ceramic pastes and recovered primarily from midden deposits interpreted as general household refuse. Although Arnold and Follensbee (2015: 14) stressed the formal consistency of La Joya figurines, which were “produced according to a relatively narrow range of acceptable ‘ways of making,’” they noted that the overall homogeneity is interrupted by “certain subtle distinctions.” These include a high percentage of Trapiche-style figurines, with their consistently open mouths (Fig. 3.4a), and so-called tripod figurines, which in



Figure 3.4 La Joya figurines: (a) Trapiche-style heads; (b) torsos showing costuming. Photos courtesy of Philip Arnold

addition to two legs include a “third, tripod-like support on the back” (Arnold and Follensbee 2015: 16). A minority (42 percent) of La Joya figurines display clothing, and, when present, it appears to follow “the canons of other Gulf Olmec assemblages” (Fig. 3.4b) (Arnold and Follensbee 2015: 17). Compare, for example, the figurine illustrated in Figure 3.4b, right, to San Lorenzo Monument 34 (Fig. 2.4): both wear similar large circular pectorals and belts. Arnold and Follensbee’s data complicate Cheetham’s (2009: 155) assertion that clothing is a relatively rare attribute of Early Preclassic Gulf Coast Olmec figurines.

Arnold and Follensbee (2015: 21–22) also called attention to the elaborate and diverse hairstyles and headdresses represented at La Joya, noting the uniqueness of each, which may have signaled social affiliation or status. Although not visible from a frontal view, the headdress of the figurine on the left in Figure 3.4a appears to represent a bird of some sort (Philip Arnold, personal communication, 2018). It compares, in that sense, to San Lorenzo Monument 2 (Fig. 2.2a), which also included avian insignia that Kelley (1982) and Zender (2014) suggested functioned as a nominal device. The parallel is intriguing and suggests that headdresses may have served as the location for badges of identity or affiliation in both monumental art and figurines at this very early date. Yet, as Arnold and Follensbee (2015: 22) prudently warned, the relationship between Early Preclassic figurines and assertions of identity was probably complex and fluid, and any single individual was likely “represented by several figurines over the course of his or her life, created at different times and in response to different circumstances.” Lifeways along the southern Mexican Gulf Coast, they asserted, were characterized by “material, and probably behavioral, heterogeneity” (Arnold and Follensbee 2015: 23).

Early Preclassic Arroyo phase figurines are relatively rare at Tres Zapotes, located on the western edge of the Olmec heartland. Pool et al. (2010: 99) nevertheless noted that some resemble San Lorenzo figurines, while others compare more closely to examples from the sites of El Trapiche and La Joya. Contemplating these relationships, and echoing earlier observations by Arnold (2000), Pool et al. (2010: 102) concluded that “Olmec material culture was not homogeneous” along the Gulf Coast; assemblages point to the fact that “social networks were not tightly bounded, at least inasmuch as we can discern from the flow of information as represented in pottery and figurine styles.” Clark and Colman (2014: n. 11) questioned the very nomenclature used to discuss relationships between figurines, arguing, for example, that the central Veracruz locale “Trapiche,” when applied to figurines at Tres Zapotes, suggests that

they – or their style – originated elsewhere.¹⁰ Exacerbating the situation, they argued, is the fact that figurines from even more distant regions of Mesoamerica, including Oaxaca, the Mexican highlands, and the Sotonusco, could be labeled “Trapiche.” They called for a history of style that takes into consideration the accidental nature of archaeological investigation, whose legacy continues to influence not only our systems of nomenclature but the ways in which we characterize spheres of communication and exchange.

The Basin of Mexico

The Basin of Mexico has yielded important archaeological data concerning figurine use during the Early Preclassic period. At Tlatilco and Tlapacoya, the remarkable preservation and unusual completeness of figurines was enabled by their deposition in burials.¹¹ Christine Neiderberger (1996: 90) described a wide range of figurines representing real or conventional personages, including acrobats or masked figurines, mythological beings, young women (dubbed “pretty ladies” by Vaillant), and a group of elaborately costumed individuals she identified as ballplayers. Clark and Colman (2014: 173) called attention to the presence of Olmec-style attributes that include elongated heads, fleshy cheeks, often-downturned mouths, and narrow, angled eyes with very small, if any, pupils. These Olmec-style figurines occurred beside figurines produced in a local style (Paradis 2017). Lesure (2015: 109), following Paul Tolstoy (1989: 98), viewed the impact of the Olmec style as fairly brief in Central Mexico, coming and going as rapidly as other styles evident in the corpus. He noted, however, that the “ephemeral impact of the Olmec style” on figurines in Central Mexico contrasts with the more enduring nature of Olmec influence visible in the monumental record. Pool (2017: 267) cautioned, as well, that the contexts of Olmec-style figurines outside the Gulf Coast often differ considerably, which suggests that their uses and meanings, too, diverged from similar examples in the Olmec heartland.¹²

Lesure analyzed and compared figurines from (1) Zacatenco, located just to the west of the system of lakes that dominated the Basin of Mexico into the colonial period, whose zenith corresponded to 1000–500 BC and followed the decline of Tlapacoya and nearby Tlatilco; (2) Ticomán, which flourished from 600 to 200 BC along the same western margin of the ancient lakes; and (3) four sites located in the modern state of Tlaxcala with occupations during the years 900–400 BC. Most figurines from these locales were recovered from domestic debris in a broken state. Lesure’s (2015: 103) theoretical focus was in determining, as he put it, the “strength of

references to subject matter among the figurines” from these sites.¹³ For example, he noted that most Tlaxcalan figurines wear earspools, which runs counter to the fact that no *actual* earspools dating to prior to 500 BC have been discovered in this region. Based on this disparity, Lesure (2015: 103) suggested that “[f]igurine makers fashioned human images with earspools even though they themselves did not wear such ornaments.” Although he had originally contemplated the possibility that these figurines portrayed high-status people from other regions who did, indeed, wear earspools, Lesure ultimately concluded, instead, that Tlaxcalan figurines are “*copies of the figurines made by such people*” (emphasis in original). They were, in other words, “not so much representations of people as they were representations of other figurines.” The implications of this are quite fascinating: Lesure’s evidence suggests that representations engendered other representations, even when many degrees of separation existed between them and the actual bodies that had originally inspired their form.¹⁴

Oaxaca

Evidence from Early Preclassic Oaxaca highlights the interpretive debates surrounding the functions of figurines in the ancient past. Marcus (1998: 45) discussed the small solid Early Preclassic Tierras Largas phase figurines that “were abundant in the households and middens of every village” in the Valley of Oaxaca.¹⁵ The standardized faces of the figurines, most of which Marcus argued represent females, contrast with their more ornate and idiosyncratic hairdos. This led her to postulate that they were focused on expressing identity, particularly concerning age and marital status. She further suggested that the figurines not only depicted women but were crafted *by* women, who utilized them within the household unit and its adjacent spaces (Marcus 1998: 4–5; 2018).¹⁶ Other scholars have questioned this interpretation. Blomster (2009: 127) argued, for example, that Marcus’s identification of flat-chested figurines as prepubescent females neglects the possibility that they might actually depict males and, as a result, inflates the frequency of female representations (also see Winter 2005).¹⁷ Figurines portraying males appear to have made an increased appearance in assemblages both in the Valley of Oaxaca and the Mixteca Alta highlands during the ensuing San José phase. These changes were likely linked to emerging systems of hereditary rank and broad transformations in social identities at a moment of increasing social complexity (Blomster 2009, 2011; Marcus 1998; Martínez López and Winter 1994; Winter 2005).

Marcus (1998: 177; 2018) argued that a group of San José phase figurines from the site of San José Mogote, found beneath the floor of House 16, represents an organized scene composed of three standing figures (one missing its head) and one seated figure (Fig. 3.5):

Three of them ... lay supine and fully extended, with their arms folded across their chests and their heads pointing slightly north of east. This orientation may be significant, since (1) many San José phase villagers were buried fully extended with their heads to the east, and (2) many public buildings of the period were oriented slightly north of east.

Most significantly for this discussion, the assemblage suggests that orchestrated groupings of Early Preclassic figural objects did not transpire only in the realm of monumental sculpture, as at Loma del Zapote (Fig. 2.6), but were also conceptualized using much smaller clay figurines as well.

Marcus (1998: 312) also addressed the fact that many of the figurines found at sites in the Valley of Oaxaca were broken, pointing out repetitive patterns of defacement to certain facial features. She suggested that the battering of noses and lips was potential evidence of a desire to prevent individuals alien to a given household from (re)utilizing figurines, which were central to rituals of ancestor veneration.

In the highlands of Oaxaca at the Mixteca Alta site of Etlatongo, figurines began to appear with greater

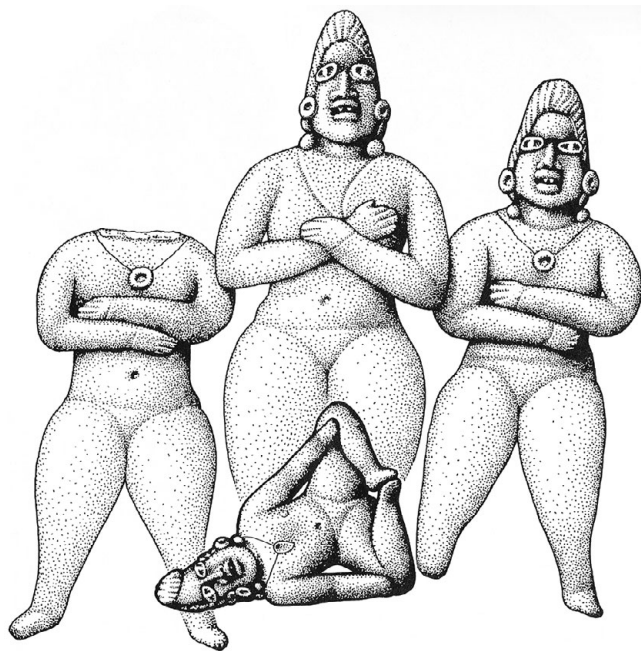


Figure 3.5 San José Mogote figurine assemblage. Drawing courtesy of Joyce Marcus

frequency in the later portion of the Early Preclassic period (Cruz B phase) when occupation at the center expanded (Blomster 2009: 122; 2014: 85). The paucity of earlier figurines at Etlatongo may not be due solely to the lack of an extensive Cruz A phase occupation or associated deposits, however. At the Mixteca Alta site of Yucuita, where there was a vibrant Cruz A phase occupation, figurines are also scarce (Blomster 2014: 85; Winter 1984). This led Blomster (2009: 126) to assert that “demographics alone do not account for the different figurine frequencies.”¹⁸ Most Cruz B figurines from Etlatongo are fragmentary and found in middens or construction fill. Although Blomster (2009: 123) maintained that there was no correlation between the status of the residence and figurine frequency at Etlatongo, he did note that hollow, Olmec-style figurines have a markedly restricted distribution, which suggests that they were “not equally available to all members of society” (also see Marcus 1998 for the Valley of Oaxaca).

Blomster (2009: 134–135) noted that Cruz B figurines at Etlatongo (Fig. 3.6a) existed beside a small percentage of Olmec-style figurines, which display elongated heads, fleshy faces, trough-shaped eyes, and downturned mouths that also, sometimes, include a flared upper lip (Fig. 3.6b).¹⁹ The presence of Olmec-style figurines with no visual precedent in the region surely conjured notions of foreignness, according to Blomster (2009: 143), and led him to question why, at this juncture in time, certain individuals in Oaxaca “chose to show a relationship with something that was ‘other.’” He concluded that these Olmec-style figurines, whose appearance coincided with an increased number of male

figurines both in the Mixteca Alta and the Valley of Oaxaca, were emblematic of the social transformations that characterized this period in Oaxacan history.²⁰ Yet, as Blomster (2009: 145) also observed, evidence from San José Mogote suggests that these foreign identities were not passively received, but also reinvented and transformed: a figurine depicting a female in a “purely local Early to Middle Preclassic style” suckles a baby with an elongated Olmec-style cranium (see Fernández Dávila and Gómez Serafín 1997: 85).

Importantly, Blomster documented the presence of figurines beyond domestic contexts at Etlatongo, calling attention to the high frequency of figurine fragments – more than ten times greater than anywhere else at the site – in the fill of Unit 1, where they had been used to elevate and delimit this public space during the Cruz B phase (Blomster 2009: 124). Early public structures probably required communal sponsorship, he argued, which was expressed in part through the deposition of clay figurines portraying a range of social characters. The relationship between fragmented bodies and communal activities at Etlatongo is provocative, and I return to it in Chapter 5.

Data from excavations undertaken on the Pacific Coast of Oaxaca are equally informative. Guy Hepp (2007, 2015) recovered 250 figurines at La Consentida, most of which share an emphasis on the female form. Their “ubiquitous recovery contexts,” asserted Hepp (2015: 273; also see Hepp and Rieger 2014: 134), indicate that people from across the socioeconomic spectrum were engaged with acts of representation. The figurines, which display elaborate hairstyles, headdresses, and jewelry, speak to an interest in bodily decoration, as do the ceramic, shell, and stone beads recovered in burial offerings and fill. One figurine in particular, which shares features with Cruz A figurines in the Mixteca Alta, came from a context with a radiocarbon date of 1880–1641 cal BC, which attests to the early date at which figurines were utilized at La Consentida (Hepp 2015: 278). Another figurine from a very early temporal context possesses a hole through its neck, as if for suspension (Hepp 2015: 278–280, fig. 7.19). This evidence suggests that the people of La Consentida sometimes “wore” figurines; figurines helped to materialize “decorous bodies,” which played a role in processes of identification and socialization (R. Joyce 2003: 259; Lesure 1999). Yet the ways in which figurines articulated identity were complex. A female figurine associated with the burial of an adult male led Hepp (2015: 289) to assert that “figurines left as burial offerings need not have represented the interred individual in a strictly anatomical sense.”

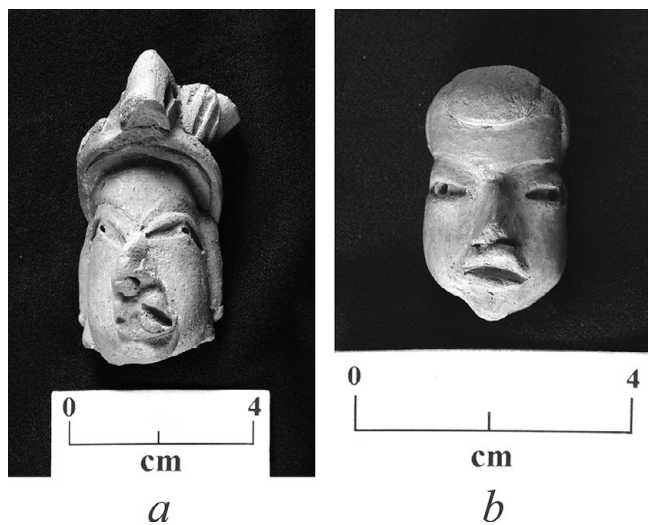


Figure 3.6 Figurines from Etlatongo, Oaxaca: (a) typical Cruz B figurine; (b) Olmec-style figurine. Photos by Jeffrey Blomster

An essay by Hepp and Joyce (2013: 266, 291–292) elaborated on the relationships between figurines and social identity in the Río Verde Valley of Oaxaca during the Preclassic period. They argued that figurine rituals marked life-stage events and were also utilized in ceremonies focused on harnessing a more spiritual realm that included the remembrance of ancestors. Hybrid anthropomorphic/animal figurines, they suggested, indicate a desire to conceptualize the human–animal relationship. They further noted that figurines were utilized in both public and domestic spaces, suggesting a continuum of contexts they referred to as

communal domesticity, by which we mean a network of public social interactions linking individuals, households, and corporate groups. This overlap between the “public” and “private” realms of social life recalls practice theory, in that daily interaction promotes the construction of communal identity, while differential participation in that community ethic contributes to social distinctions according to status, gender, age, and affiliations of lineage, kinship, or corporate group. (Hepp and Joyce 2013: 268–269)

Middle Preclassic Figurines beyond the Pacific Slope

Figurines continued to be central to Middle Preclassic people and their practices. Evidence also indicates that stylistic change kept pace with the many social transformations that accompanied the transition from the Early to the Middle Preclassic period.

La Venta and the Tabasco Region

Drucker (1952: 139) discussed 117 “reasonably complete figurine heads” documented at La Venta during excavations by the Smithsonian Institution. William Rust (2008) expanded this corpus considerably during his dissertation research, recovering 673 figurines from La Venta and outlying sites in his settlement survey. Summarizing the data from La Venta, Pool (2017: 259) noted a distinct “transition in technological and aesthetic style” in which Middle Preclassic figurine heads became broader, headgear and hairstyles became more elaborate, and punctuation and appliqué replaced modeling and incision as the preferred techniques for decoration (Fig. 3.7a) (also see Drucker 1952: 132–133).²¹

Miriam Gallegos Gómora (2011) likewise called attention to the emphasis on headdresses and adornment characterizing Middle Preclassic figurines in Tabasco; she viewed differences in attire as more salient to expressions of social difference than sexual characteristics. At the site



Figure 3.7 Veracruz figurines: (a) La Venta figurine; (b) Tres Zapotes figurine. Panel (a) originally published in Drucker (1952: plate 28a), photo by Erin Sears, courtesy of Christopher Pool (shelf unit #A403547–0); panel (b) originally published in Weiant (1943: plate 10, no. 10), photo by Erin Sears, courtesy of Christopher Pool (shelf unit #A38566–0)

of San Andrés, a secondary center located approximately 5 km northeast of La Venta, Maria Tway (2004) documented 306 figurines made from local clays. San Andrés figurines bear similarities to figurines from La Venta and more distant Chiapa de Corzo, which suggests paths of communication and exchange along the Grijalva River. Tway (2004: 77) noted that San Andrés figurines were frequently encountered in residential spaces associated with feasting activities and with concentrations of elite items and paraphernalia. Seventeen examples display circular pendants whose shape compares closely to the hematite mirror worn by a greenstone figurine from La Venta (Benson and de la Fuente 1996: 16). In addition, Tway (2004: 14) noted that of the 306 figurines at San Andrés, all but one had been broken in a manner that she described as “deliberate.”²²

Pool (2017: 265) suggested that the formal changes evidenced by Middle Preclassic figurines throughout the Gulf Coast region were linked to expanding social roles that developed during this period. Coincident with these changes was the disappearance of the bald, elongated “Olmec style” heads so typical of Early Preclassic figurines in this region. Yet, as he clarified (Pool 2017: 259), elongated Olmec-style heads did not vanish entirely from the visual record: they were “transferred to stone.” La Venta Altar 5 (Fig. 2.12a) illustrates the transference to which Pool alluded. The elongated heads of the babies closely resemble those of Early Preclassic “Olmec style” figurines (Fig. 3.3) or the El Manatí wooden busts (Ortiz and Rodríguez 2000), albeit with the addition of attributes that lend them supernatural qualities. The formal relationship between the “babies” on Middle Preclassic Altar 5 and earlier Early Preclassic Olmec-style figurines and wooden busts is remarkable, and one cannot help but

wonder if the Altar 5 babies did not scale up and memorialize in stone earlier objects of diverse, and sometimes more ephemeral, materials.

Responding to Drucker's (1952: 134) claim that La Venta figurines typically wear earspools, Clark and Colman (2014: 176) countered that, in actuality, only about 7.9 percent display that type of ornamentation.²³ Earspools are a frequent attribute of humans on sculpture at La Venta, however, as well as a regular component of contexts that Clark and Colman (2014: 177) interpreted as interments.²⁴ Clark and Colman (2014: 182) took these disparities as evidence of "privileged consumption of earspools at La Venta," not unlike that at San Lorenzo during the Early Preclassic period. They argued that earspools were an expression of personal beautification that, with the rise of social complexity and increased stratification, were "pressed into the service of the state as markers of elevated station, a signal reinforced by the general disappearance of these markers on ceramic figurines – images made by the population at large" (Clark and Colman 2014: 183). Clark and Colman conceded, however, that this assessment does not hold true across Mesoamerica. During the Middle Preclassic period in the Soconusco region and the Valley of Mexico, for example, earspools are regularly portrayed on figurines.

Such findings indicate that the social significance of costuming varied according to region, even among contemporaneous groups that were, as demonstrated by the archaeological record, participating in shared spheres of trade and communication. Figurines, every bit as much or more than monumental sculpture, provide scholars with an important archive of information concerning personal adornment, which is "intimately tied to the body, openly displayed, and subject to social assessment" (R. Joyce 1999: 19; also see Lesure 1999: 217–219).²⁵ Joyce, invoking Nancy Munn's (1986: 96–102) influential study of value creation, asserted that the social markings of human bodies were not only an important medium through which individual identity was expressed but also a vehicle that enabled people to be "persuasive" to others, thereby enhancing their positive evaluation as well as their influence. Variations in costume and ornamentation, even subtle, provide insight into what was, or was not, persuasive at any given moment in time in a particular region. Earspools at San Lorenzo and La Venta appear to have been persuasive, in the sense that they effectively set elites apart and reinforced social identities and boundaries.

Tres Zapotes

In the region surrounding Tres Zapotes, the number of Middle Preclassic communities expanded although

settlement continued to be dispersed. Many Tres Zapotes figurines display punched eyes, in keeping with their counterparts at La Venta, but other close parallels are more difficult to find. A figurine common at Tres Zapotes, but absent at La Venta, is characterized by two striated plaits of hair that descend down the sides of the head, covering the tops of the ears but falling just short of prominent, forward-facing earspools (Fig. 3.7b) (Pool 2017: 259). The bald heads, sometimes including a single lock of hair, which had predominated during the Early Preclassic period, gave way to increased variation in head-dresses and hairstyles; there was also a concomitant decrease in nudity, and a marked diversification of costumes. These changes hint at a new, Middle Preclassic interest in expressing expanded social roles (Pool 2017: 265; also see Grove and Gillespie 1984).

Chalcatzingo

Additional insight into the social significance of figurines during the Middle Preclassic period comes from the site of Chalcatzingo, where Grove (1984: 85), Gillespie (1987), and Cyphers (1993: 217, 220) attributed the abundance of figurines in residential contexts to household rituals that transpired outside public, ceremonial contexts. More than half of the 8,000 fragmentary figurines date to the Middle Preclassic Cantera phase and were found in association with hearths, pit features, domestic refuse, and food-processing areas. Grove and Gillespie (2002: 13) noted that most figurines at Chalcatzingo appear to have been "purposely broken, usually by snapping their heads off in an act of decapitation."²⁶

Cyphers (1993: 217) described one context of particular interest. An elite household complex in the southwest corner of the Central Plaza revealed remains of drill cores and more than 1,400 figurine fragments; another 125 were found clustered in association with five polishing stones and quantities of red pigment. Based on this evidence, Cyphers concluded that figurines at Chalcatzingo were not produced in every household, but instead in specialized workshops, perhaps controlled by an elite group.²⁷ She also pointed to the preponderance of nude or partially clothed female figurines, which she linked to the negotiation of stages in the female life cycle.²⁸ In an earlier study, Grove and Gillespie (1984) had argued that a particular type of figurine – designated as type C8 and first defined by Vaillant (1930: 112) in the Basin of Mexico – represented portraits of male rulers or ancestral founders.²⁹ Cyphers (1993: 214) countered that a consideration of extant figurine bodies made this unlikely, since most appear to portray females. The majority of figurines from Chalcatzingo, in contrast to those from

La Venta, typically wear earspools. These data, as Clark and Colman (2014: 174) noted, mirror evidence from elite burials at Chalcatzingo where jade earspools were recovered (Merry de Morales 1987).

The Maya Lowlands and Honduras

Domestic contexts for figurines are well attested in the Maya Lowlands during the Preclassic period, as at Blackman Eddy, Belize, where M. Kathryn Brown (2003: 105) documented numerous figurines near early household structures. The same pattern is also evident at Cahal Pech, further to the west in Belize, where Cheetham (1998) analyzed ninety-one fragmentary samples. Yet, as Cheetham (1998: 43–44) described, layered, ritual deposits at the north and south corners of Middle Preclassic Platform B at Cahal Pech – interpreted as a community structure – also contained figurines. According to James Garber (personal communication, 2011), this evidence indicates that Preclassic figurines were, at times, employed in the service of community ritual at Cahal Pech.³⁰

Prudence Rice (2015) documented a similar association between figurines and spaces of communal activity and/or ritual in the Petén region of Guatemala between 800 and 400 BC. Figurines and fragments were found in E-Groups, triadic groups, and/or royal mortuaries at Tikal and Uaxactun, and in the communal mounds and plazas of the Lake Petén Itzá basin sites of Nixtun-Ch'ich' and Ixlú. She argued that the figurines were used to invoke ancestors, “connect with cosmological powers and legitimacy,” and “define and underwrite the roles and authority of nascent lowland elites in the changing circumstances of emergent societal complexity” (Rice 2015: 2). She further noted their uneven distribution throughout the southern lowlands and lack of detailed iconography outside of a few headdresses. As she phrased it, “[t]o the extent that style can be considered a medium of visual communication, the figurines are laconic.”³¹

Figurines were used both in domestic contexts and in communal rituals associated with newly developing civic/ceremonial spaces at the Preclassic site of Playa de los Muertos in Honduras (R. Joyce 2003: 250).³² The Middle Preclassic hand-modeled figurines are extremely detailed and demand careful examination in order to be fully appreciated.³³ They display little clothing and many are nude, but while bodies tend to be stereotyped and the range of actions limited, attention was lavished on hair and ornaments worn on the head, ears, and around necks and wrists (R. Joyce 2000b: 69; 2003: 256). Joyce linked these representations to practices of beautification, or “the social marking of the body as desirable,” and argued that they likely reflected traditions of bodily adornment

practiced by the people who had once lived in this community.³⁴ Joyce (2000b: 69) further argued that ancient ideas of beauty, accessible to us through these extant figurines, were

a social construct whose validation came in the form of greater social success. And this success, in turn, laid the groundwork for certain individuals and their social groups to have greater access both to more labor and to additional resources through their social connections.

The Honduran figurines also reveal a concern with transitions in age, particularly of females, which Joyce (2003: 256) interpreted as central to the “gradual production of social persons.” The figurines were, she maintained, related to embodied practices; they evidence, in other words, a recursive relationship between “the production of figurines and the production of members of this regional society” (R. Joyce 2003: 250; 2007). Through crafting and utilizing figurines, people interacted with “representations of idealized moments in the lives of human subjects” and were incorporated into the production of proper social roles (R. Joyce 2003: 251). In Joyce’s model, figurines provide entrée into the ways in which standards of beauty and scales of value were established and measured, and the ways in which age grades were communicated. These aspects of the figurines, she argued, were far more pertinent to their evaluation than gender categories; she found little concern, in the assemblage, with distinctions between male and female (R. Joyce 2003: 256). Yet, as she qualified, there is a tension between the pronounced aspects of individual identity – expressed through attention to hair and ornamentation – and the restricted range of positions and actions of the bodies. While the figurines provided a surface for individualization, they also served as “models of decorum” and, as a result, adhere to certain constraints (R. Joyce 2003: 258; 2007).

Joyce (2003: 259) also called attention to the fact that smaller figurines in the form of pendants became increasingly popular through time, becoming a part of the “decorous bodies” of adults at these early Honduran sites.³⁵ Appended to the bodies of individuals, the figurines also became more mobile, moving in tandem with the individuals whose bodies they decorated. Animal imagery played a role in the Playa de los Muertos figurine tradition, and some animal figurines, too, were worn as pendants. Joyce suggested that these animals signified animal spirit companions, or “a non-material part of the self, represented as an animal, that acted while the body was asleep, and could act in arenas where the physical body could not, including the realm of ancestors and sacred beings” (R. Joyce 2003: 259).

Joyce's interpretations are significant for two key reasons. First, her suggestion that animal figurines signified "non-material" parts of the self opens up new avenues of investigation for considering the parameters of ancient indigenous selfhood. Second, her emphasis on figurines as vehicles through which notions of appropriate behavior were communicated and enacted is, I believe, key to both their success and their diminution during the Late Preclassic period. I return to both of these points in [Chapters 5 and 6](#).

The Guatemalan Highlands

Figurines at the highland Guatemalan site of Naranjo were also central to communal ritual. Adriana Linares (2009: 36) documented 214 fragmentary human heads, 224 human torsos, and 904 fragmentary extremities (mostly legs and arms).³⁶ Sixty-two percent of these Las Charcas phase figurines were found in association with the South Platform at Naranjo, which was situated in the central sector of the site (Arroyo 2010; Linares 2009: 117; Linares and Arroyo 2008: 83). The South Platform contained a concentration of ceremonial deposits including figurines but no domestic refuse, which supports Bárbara Arroyo et al.'s (2007: 868) identification of it as a location of ritual activity rather than habitation. According to Linares, facial features of the figurines are quite standardized, but considerable variation appears in the form of hair and headdresses, as at other centers. She determined that 65 percent of torsos portray females, many of which appear to also denote the state of pregnancy; representations of pregnant females were particularly concentrated along the west side of the South Platform (Linares 2009: 120–121).³⁷

Arroyo (2010: 321–324) suggested that Naranjo may have served as a pilgrimage destination during the Middle Preclassic period. She argued that its location, situated on a high plain in the mountains above modern Guatemala City, was deemed appropriate for the commemoration of cycles of time, which were memorialized by a series of plain monuments aligned in four rows (also see Pereira 2009). As both Arroyo and Linares recognized, the deposition of figurines was an essential component of the ritual activities documented at Naranjo. So, too, I would add, was their dismemberment: only seven of the figurines found at Naranjo are complete (Linares 2009: 155).

The situation at nearby Kaminaljuyu is more difficult to assess based on the fact that much of the site and many neighboring ones are now covered by the urban sprawl of modern Guatemala City. Scholars are often reliant on relatively limited salvage or rescue projects rather than

systematic excavation guided by targeted research questions. Even in the mid-twentieth century, Alfred Kidder (1965: 148) lamented his inability to establish contexts or precise dating for figurines at Kaminaljuyu due to the fact that most examples at his disposal were from private collections or provided by locals "engaged in the recent wholesale razing of mounds for real estate developments." In his 1978 report from the Pennsylvania State excavations, Ronald Wetherington (1978: 301) echoed Kidder's refrain, noting that of the 1,158 figurine fragments recovered, most heads were "eroded beyond recognition of significant features" and that finer specimens had long since made their way into private collections. Although he speculated that his chronological analysis of the figurines would require refinement in the future, he nevertheless noted that of the 136 fragments with reliable contexts, fifty-four of them dated to the Middle Preclassic period (Wetherington 1978: 310). Wetherington also commented on the "naturalistic" attributes of these figurines, including open mouths that revealed teeth inside. Edwin Shook and Marion Popenoe de Hatch (1999: 295) noted that Las Charcas phase figurines at Kaminaljuyu are hand-modeled and predominantly solid, and although most portray humans, animals and effigy whistles are also present.³⁸ I return in [Chapter 6](#) to the figurine tradition at Kaminaljuyu, which persisted well into the Late Preclassic period.

Chiapa de Corzo

More than 1,000 figurines have been recovered from Chiapa de Corzo in the highlands of modern Chiapas, Mexico. Thomas Lee (1967: 213) recorded 247 figurine heads and 965 body fragments, the majority of which pertained to Middle Preclassic Dili phase contexts.³⁹ More recent excavations under the direction of Bruce Bachand revealed abundant figurines in a large Dili phase trash deposit in the principal plaza between Structures 4c and 5, and in association with a Dili phase midden encountered during exploration of the southeast corner of Structure 1 (Bachand et al. 2009: 500–503). Of the 156 figurines found in more recent excavations, 87 percent are anthropomorphic according to Bruce Bachand, Emiliano Gallaga Murrieta, and Lynne Lowe (2008: 172), who also noted their persistence: figurines appear in contexts that stretch from the Early Preclassic Cotorra phase to the Early Classic Jiquipilas phase.⁴⁰ The most frequent figurine type at Chiapa de Corzo, designated Type 1-A (Lee 1969), is characterized by naturalistic features, eyes formed via a shallow impression with a deeply bored pupil, thick lips that are slightly parted, and frequent ear ornamentation. Certain aspects of Type

1-A figurines are shared with figurines from the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Coast of Guatemala during the Conchas phase (1000–600 BC), which led Bachand et al. (2008: 176) to conclude that these parallels “appear to indicate something beyond the passive sharing of styles throughout these regions and Central Chiapas during the early Middle Preclassic period.”

Oaxaca

In his consideration of figurines from the highlands of Oaxaca during the Middle Preclassic period, Blomster (2017: 287) noted a preference for ornamentation instead of natural modeling. This transpired, he argued, in spite of a “dramatic reimagining of the head shape,” which became wider and less elongated, much as it had in the Gulf Coast region. Notwithstanding these changes, overall figurine use declined considerably as did stylistic diversity. In the Valley of Oaxaca, figurines also decreased in stylistic diversity when compared with the late Early Preclassic period and exhibited greater attention to costume and ornamentation than the naturalistic rendering of bodies; larger earspools also became more frequent. Blomster (2017: 293) suggested that, in Oaxaca, “some of the social identities and roles that had been materialized in figurines, and subject to engagement and negotiation, were no longer accessible, or desired, by all members of the population.” He also qualified that, although Olmec-style figurines disappeared from the archaeological record, Olmec-style imagery reappeared in the form of exotic, greenstone objects.

Early and Middle Preclassic Figurines along the Pacific Slope

Having sketched the general contours of Early and Middle Preclassic figurine traditions throughout much of Mesoamerica, I now turn to their long history on the Pacific slope. The story of figurine use along the south coast cannot be told in isolation from the rest of Mesoamerica, which is why I address it only after presenting the extraordinary history of figuration in clay from other regions. I reserve consideration of the extensive corpus of figurines from Middle Preclassic La Blanca for Chapter 4.

By the end of the Barra phase, c. 1700 BC, a few figurines made an appearance in the Mazatán area of coastal Chiapas. Clark and Colman (2014: 156) described two fragmentary heads, both hollow, which they suggested were precursors to the large, hollow figurine tradition of later periods. These rare Barra phase

figurines ushered in a tradition that would increase in intensity in the ensuing Locona phase (1700–1500 BC) and endure for centuries (Clark and Colman 2014: 156; Green and Lowe 1967; Rosenswig 2010: 187).

Figurines from Paso de la Amada and other large village sites in the Mazatán region, typically encountered in domestic contexts and in a broken or discarded state, portray “stylized human images that seem to depict standard social categories or stereotypes rather than individuals” (Lesure 1997: 228).⁴¹ The theme most favored was standing women with prominent breasts, most of whom are missing naturalistic arms and possess only short, rounded stubs where arms would normally be.⁴² As will be recalled, a similar compositional format in which stubs substituted for fully formed arms also characterized the wooden busts of El Manatí (Tate 2012: 83–84). The heads and facial features of figurines from Paso de la Amada reveal variations through time, although “noses are often crudely depicted between the eyes without any attempt to represent true anatomical relations between these features. Mouths are typically absent entirely” (Lesure 1999: 213). By the Ocós phase (1500–1400 BC), there is an increased attention to complicated hairstyles, head ornaments, and naturalistic facial features. Lesure (1999: 214) viewed these “virtuosic caricatures” as evidence of an increasing labor investment in the crafting of solid figurines used by most villagers:

Figurine-making was no longer an entirely expedient activity. Increasingly, figurine makers cultivated a skill, spending more time and effort on individual pieces. Although production was still informal, small-scale, and household-based, the changes in skill and labour input suggest that a smaller subset of individuals made figurines in the Ocós phase than in the previous Locona phase. Producers and “consumers” of solid figurines were increasingly likely to be different people.

For Lesure (1999: 218–219), Early Preclassic figurines were a key part of a social arena “already primed” for “an intensifying emphasis on the body and its symbolic elaboration.”

Zoomorphic figurines also appear at Paso de la Amada, as well as some that Lesure interpreted as depictions of human beings costumed as animals or fantastic creatures. Lesure (1997: 241) conjectured that “the individuals who put on these costumes and masks were understood to be maintaining balanced interrelationships between human, animal, natural, and supernatural worlds on behalf of their communities.” He also suggested that the obesity of some of the costumed figurines signified age, and that they represented village elders who may have held significant social and spiritual authority (Lesure

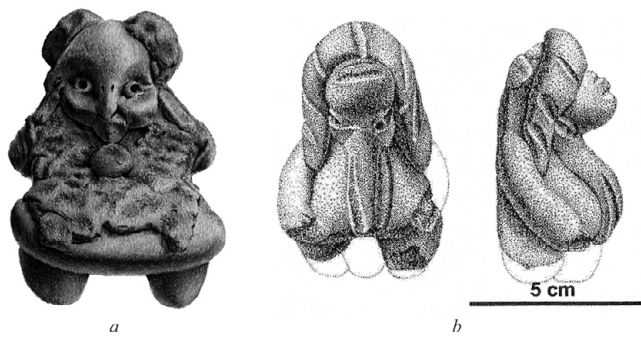


Figure 3.8 Figurines from Chiapas: (a) enthroned figurine from Mazatán; (b) Cuauhtémoc figurine, front and side views. Drawing (a) courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation; panel (b) courtesy of Robert Rosenswig

1997: 242).⁴³ Clark (1991: 21, fig. 6) had previously called attention to Ocos phase figurines from the Mazatán zone that portray corpulent individuals wearing costumes and masks and seated on legged stools or thrones, which he suggested conveyed their status as “shaman/chiefs.” The seats of the Mazatán figurines symbolically and figuratively “raised” the status of the individuals resting upon them (Fig. 3.8a) (Clark et al. 2010: 15).⁴⁴

Similar masked figurines appear at the site of Cuauhtémoc during the initial part of the Early Preclassic period, as one example wearing a very long-billed guise demonstrates (Fig. 3.8b) (Rosenswig 2011: 253). The manner in which the mask was portrayed is quite arresting. When looking at the figurine from the front, the viewer’s eyes are drawn, first and foremost, to the duck-billed visage and its eyes, which peer outward intently. The eyes of the anthropomorphic figure wearing the mask are completely shrouded by the broad, thick band of a headdress; only the lower portion of the figure’s upturned face is visible. Viewed from the side, however, one can more readily perceive that the long-billed mask rests on the human’s chest. Vision, in this case, is the property of the mask, not of the human wearing it.

Contextualizing this Cuauhtémoc figurine within the suite of Preclassic duck-billed iconography makes clear that these objects did not exist in a vacuum but were part of intervisual webs of meaning that knew few boundaries in terms of medium or scale or geography (Guernsey and Love 2008). For example, the Cuauhtémoc figurine resembles a Locona phase ceramic effigy vessel from the same site that portrays a life-like human face whose lower jaw is obscured by a mask in the form of a duckbill (Rosenswig 2003, 2011: 254, fig. 11.3G). It also compares to ceramic and stone duck-billed figures that appeared in a variety of forms, mediums, and sizes throughout the Preclassic period (Guernsey and Love 2008).⁴⁵

Different but equally vital information concerning the context and use of figurines comes from the Early Preclassic coastal Mazatán site of El Varal, which was focused on salt production and distribution within the wider socioeconomic orbit of Ojo de Agua during the Jocotal phase (1200–1000 BC). In spite of El Varal’s limited seasonal occupation, Lesure (2009: fig. 14.10, 157, 198–199) documented 128 fragmentary figurines there. He questioned why, in a place where one might anticipate a focus solely on salt production, that such “extraneous domestic artifacts” would be found. He concluded that their presence indicates that seasonal occupants were engaged with more than salt extraction during their stays, which probably lasted for weeks and involved a large and diverse group of individuals. The evidence also suggests that figurines were socially expedient in a variety of contexts along the Pacific Coast during the Early Preclassic period, beyond the confines of villages with year-round occupation.

Early Preclassic figurines from the Pacific Coast are far from homogeneous. In coastal Guatemala, just southeast of the sites of La Blanca and El Ujuxte, figurine assemblages at El Mesak (Arroyo 2004: 76) lack the seated and masked type identified as elders by Clark (1991) and Lesure (1999). Moreover, to the northwest of El Varal and the Mazatán zone, in a region where Early Preclassic sites are far rarer, figurines are virtually unknown (Voorhies 1989). Robert Rosenswig (2011: 255) viewed this as indication of distinct cultural areas during the initial Early Preclassic period.⁴⁶ Later, during the second part of the Early Preclassic period, figurines from the Pacific Coast more closely resemble those from elsewhere in Mesoamerica, pointing to increased engagement with more widespread Olmec communication spheres (Lesure 1999: 218; 2009; Rosenswig 2011: 255–258). At Cantón Corralito, which rose to power in the Mazatán region during the Cuadros phase (1300–1200 BC) following Paso de la Amada’s decline, Cheetham (2009: 152, 156, 173, table 6.1) noted that the majority of figurines (840 fragments total) were made according to Olmec conventions. If one compares figurines from San Lorenzo with those from Cantón Corralito, consistent stylistic features and methods of manufacture are readily apparent. Although most were made locally, others with an uncanny resemblance to San Lorenzo examples may have been transported to Cantón Corralito from the Gulf Coast; an abundance of archaeological material related to Gulf Coast traditions supports this assertion (Cheetham 2009: 152, 172–173). Cheetham interpreted this as evidence for shared traditions of learning, but qualified that continuities with distant regions do not necessarily imply “a rigid set of figurine meanings and practices.” Much as

Blomster (2009) argued for Early Preclassic Oaxaca, similarities between figurine assemblages from disparate regions do not preclude the invention of new meanings, stimulated by the unique social circumstances of discrete urban centers.

Skin, Surfaces, and Inscription

One Cantón Corralito figurine is especially interesting for what it tells us about the communicative potential of figurines during the Cuadros phase. Lee and Cheetham (2008: fig. 7) noted that the top and back of its bald, disembodied head bear a column of incised symbols, which they linked to early writing traditions (Fig. 3.9a). Two of the symbols, the crossed bands and a diamond or “star” shape, do indeed compare to glyphs in later Isthmian and Maya writing systems.⁴⁷ But it is unlikely that they constitute writing per se. According to Houston (2004: 287–290), an example such as this, which involves glyphic elements attached to the human form, demonstrates that “the signifier (the name) remained in the same existential field as the signified (the person so identified). They were tethered to one another, and not floating to the side as glyphic captions would begin to do somewhat later in Mesoamerica.” It was the physical detachment of signs from the body, centuries later, Houston argued, which “set the stage for text to appear” in Mesoamerica.

I wish to sidestep the debate concerning what qualifies as writing in ancient Mesoamerica and, instead, emphasize the importance of this figurine for demonstrating how the human body and its surface or skin served as a communicative field, suitable for the display of symbolic information. It is tempting to view this figurine as evidence of actual practices in which human skin was stamped, tattooed, or marked with symbols and designs. Unlike in other parts of the world, where mummified bodies preserve intact skin, the humid and acidic soils of much of Mesoamerica preclude such preservation. We possess little archaeological evidence that would support assertions of a direct correlation between the inscription of figurines and the inscription of actual human bodies. Nevertheless, a figurine like this strongly suggests that embellished skin was as significant for articulating a social identity as costume and adornment.⁴⁸

The Cantón Corralito figurine was by no means unique. Additional figurines from that site, another from San Lorenzo, and two Cruz B figurines from Etlatongo display a single star motif on the back of the head, either incised or hollowed out completely (see Blomster 2009: fig. 5.11; 2017: 292; Cheetham 2009: fig. 6.20).⁴⁹ Similar markings also make an appearance on large hollow or

solid figurines of the Pilli group in the Basin of Mexico (Niederberger 2000: 181) and on the forehead of a figurine attributed to Xico, Veracruz (Joralemon 1971: fig. 18). The star motif was also rendered in red pigment on two fragmentary Cuadros phase (1300–1200 BC) figurines from Izapa (Fig. 3.9b, c) (Blomster 2014: 103; Ekholm 1989: fig. 1d, e). The star shape was not exclusive to figurines, however, and made a regular appearance on a variety of Early and Middle Preclassic ceramics either through acts of incision or a resist technique during the firing process (see Joralemon 1971: figs. 49, 57, 101, 140, and 202; Love 1991: 65–70, fig. 18). A singular small stamp from La Blanca, only about 3 cm long, also takes the form of a star, bisected by a cross (Fig. 3.9d, e), as does a tiny clay ornament, approximately 3 cm across, which was likely broken off of the headdress of a figurine at some point in the past (Fig. 3.9f).⁵⁰ The symbol clearly had significant social currency at Middle Preclassic La Blanca, appearing in a variety of contexts, from figurines to vessels and stamps.⁵¹

This intervisuality among different categories of objects parallels evidence from Neolithic Italy, where designs on the bodies of ceramic vessels mirror designs on clay stamps, which may have been used to decorate actual human bodies. Robin Skeates (2007: 206) proposed that “both types of decorated body – the human and the ceramic – might be regarded as social bodies, embedded in the quotidian practical and social activities carried out in . . . communal spaces.” Conceptual interplay between the surfaces of vessels, figurines, human skin, and even the pelts of supernatural creatures (Chinchilla and Mejía 2018; Garton and Taube 2017) is equally apparent in Preclassic Mesoamerica, where each object appears to have been construed as a social body whose surface accommodated symbolic communication. A “hollow baby” figure in the Metropolitan Museum of Art whose back is decorated with a long, vertical band of symbols eloquently illustrates this (Coe 1965a: figs. 184a, b).⁵² So, too, do “Slim,” the tall greenstone figure reputed to be from the Pacific Coast whose body is also incised with intricate designs (see Fields and Reents-Budet 2005: cat. no. 5), and the large figurines found in a royal burial at Takalik Abaj, dated to c. 500 BC, whose backs are covered in calligraphic designs (Schieber de Lavarreda 2016: fig. 5).

These sensibilities endured in Mesoamerica, as evidenced by the Late Preclassic Tuxtla Statuette, which portrays a small duck-billed figure whose body is enveloped by an elaborate inscription (Strauss 2018a). The same can certainly be said of the Danzantes at Monte Albán, whose bodies, rendered on the stone orthostats of Building L sometime after 500 BC, bear hieroglyphic

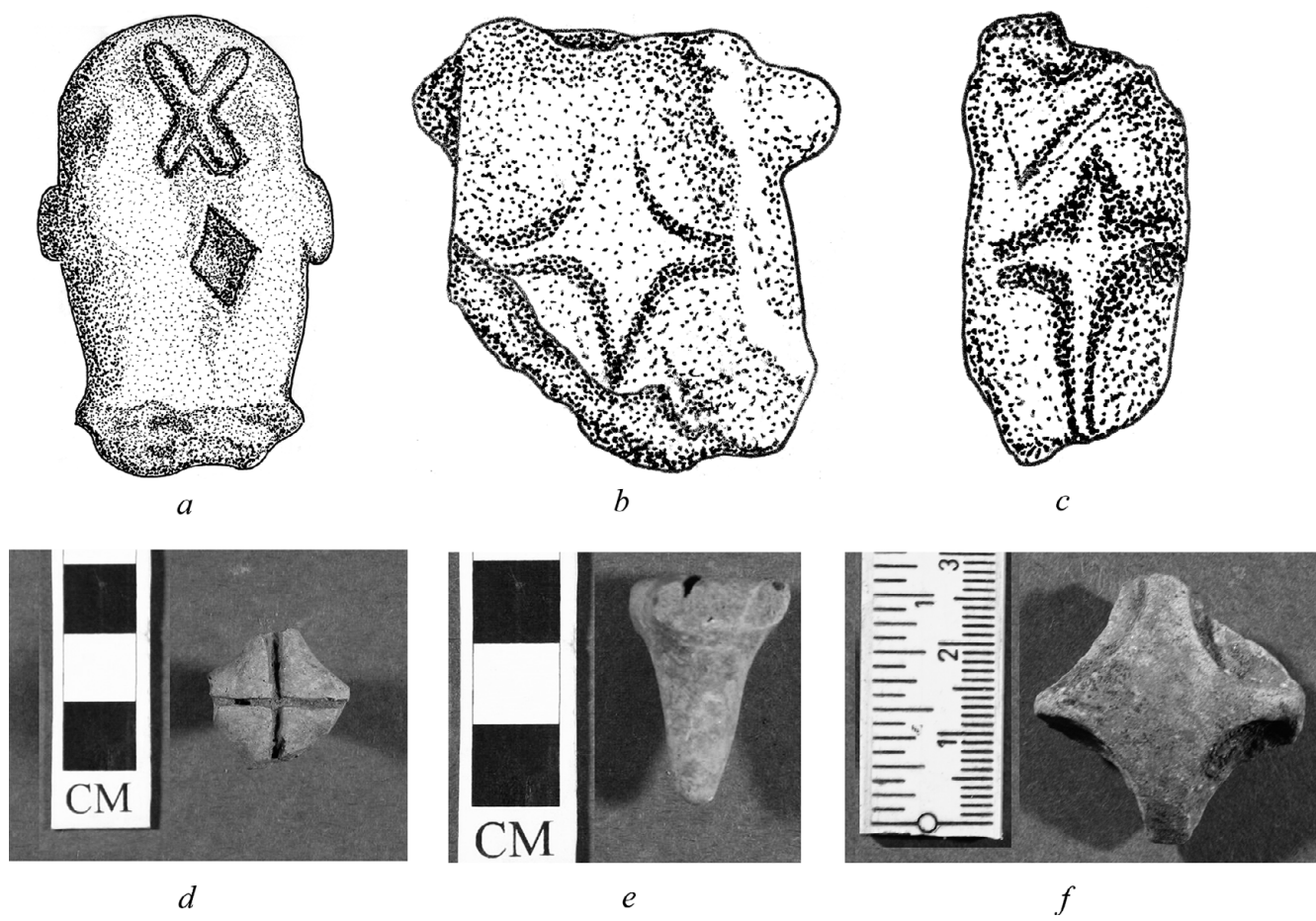


Figure 3.9 “Star” motifs on ceramic objects: (a) Cantón Corralito figurine; (b) Izapa figurine torso; (c) Izapa figurine limb; (d) La Blanca stamp, view of flat surface; (e) La Blanca stamp, profile view; (f) ornament from La Blanca figurine. Drawing (a) by author after Lee and Cheetham (2008: fig. 7); drawings (b) and (c) by author after Ekholm (1989: fig. 1d, e); panels (d)–(f) courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

inscriptions (Fig. 2.17). Likewise, a ceramic figurine fragment recovered from Guillén-phase (300–100 BC) fill in Mound 59 at Izapa is graced with a calligraphically rendered U-bracket above which hovers a single dot (Ekholm 1989: fig. 12d). The antiquity and pervasiveness of these traditions seem quite clear: Blomster (2014: 103–106) documented Early Preclassic figurines at Etlatongo whose bodies, decorated with red pigment, may mimic actual human bodies. A roller stamp from the same period, which could have produced a tattoo-like design on the surface of skin, was also recovered at the site, still coated in red pigment. Assertions of beauty and identity, Blomster (2014: 103–105) stressed, were “inscribed on the body” of these Etlatongo figurines as part of a creative process. He added, invoking the sentiments of Bourdieu (1977: 90), that it was through these bodies that “the world is read and enacted.”

Representing Sensory Capacity

Ear decoration may have played an equally significant role in communicating social ideals. Clark and Colman (2014: 145) suggested that the Preclassic emphasis on earspools anticipates much later Postclassic beliefs in which the earspools of kings symbolized their ability to hear the speech of gods. In Classic Maya art, earspools “substitute for the flesh of the living ear a culturally elaborated marker of the bodily site for reception of speech and song” (Meskell and Joyce 2003: 40). Similar ideas are documented ethnohistorically. Angélica Afanador-Pujol (2015) discussed the symbolism of ears among the P’urhépecha of Michoacán, for whom both ears and their adornments signified religious devotion, social status, and political allegiance. In the sixteenth-century *Relación de Michoacán*, the P’urhépecha describe their ancestors as having “ears fat and swollen from auto-sacrifice”; swollen ears “marked them as devout and religiously upstanding” (Afanador-Pujol 2015: 79). Ears may also have signified fully sentient beings: among the Ch’olan Maya, to hear was also to feel. Ears were the conduit by which humans could feel, understand, and process emotions (Houston et al. 2006: 183). A similar attention to specific anatomical features characterizes art traditions in other parts of the world. Meskell and Joyce (2003: 20) noted that numerous votive ears were offered to the Egyptian goddess Hathor at Deir el Bahri because she was the goddess *who listens*. They argued that such literal symbolism was key to communicating ideas for a predominantly non-literate populace.

Clark and Colman’s (2014: 156) analysis of ear ornamentation demonstrates how these ideas played out in the

Soconusco region of Chiapas during the Preclassic period. Few ear ornaments in general are featured on figurines from the Locona phase (1700–1500 BC) (Fig. 3.10a). This changed during the Ocos phase (1500–1400 BC), when an increasing number of figurines were depicted with eartubes or earspools (Fig. 3.10b). Archaeological evidence corroborates the imagery: it was during the Ocos period that ceramic eartubes began to appear in the material record (Clark and Colman 2014: 158; also see Lesure 1999: 217, table 1). Yet, as Clark and Colman (2014: 160–161) qualified, while the Cherla phase (1400–1300 BC) marked the “peak popularity” of eartubes on figurines produced in a local style, not all figurines participated in these traditions of adornment, and contemporaneous Olmec-style figurines lack comparable ornamentation. By the ensuing Cuadros (1300–1200 BC) and Jocotal (1200–1000 BC) phases, ear ornaments on figurines became quite rare altogether, as did their presence in archaeological assemblages in Mazatán (Fig. 3.10c). It was not until the Conchas phase (1000–600 BC), at the beginning of the Middle Preclassic period, that ear ornamentation became, again, a frequent attribute of figurines from the Pacific Coast (Clark and Colman 2014: 160–162, 174). Clark and Colman’s arguments are much more complex than what I have conveyed here, but even in this condensed form call attention to the significance of subtle shifts in personal adornment and their implications for the ways in which costuming, social comportment, notions of beauty, and implications of sensory capacity converged in this widely shared genre of human representation.

An emphasis on mouths, as well as ears, characterized Middle Preclassic figurines along the Pacific Coast. This interest went hand in hand, Rosenswig (2011: 258) suggested, with increased attention to the pupils of eyes rendered as large, deep, and circular. These characteristics indicate that a visualization of the senses was as key to the

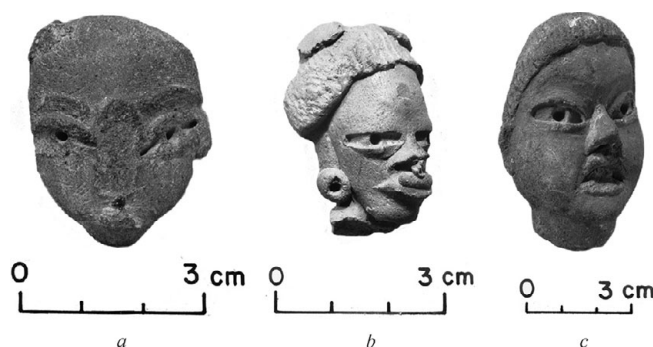


Figure 3.10 Soconusco figurines: (a) Locona phase; (b) Ocos phase; (c) Jocotal phase. From Clark and Colman (2014: figs. 6.6f, 6.7d, 6.10h). Images courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation

meaning of figurines as it was to contemporaneous stone monuments such as La Venta Monuments 2–4, which vigilantly surveyed the periphery of that community with eyes wide open and lips parted, as if speaking (González Lauck 2010: 134). As always, however, sweeping generalizations fall short of actual reality. While objects like Conchas phase figurines and the colossal heads at La Venta display a keen interest in sensory capacity, other objects allude to those capacities in much more opaque ways. As will be recalled, a realistic rendering of a mouth was abandoned altogether on La Blanca Monument 4, replaced instead by an inverted cleft maize kernel motif (Fig. 2.20b). It is as if, on Monument 4, the inferred speech of this supernatural being was concerned with the broader conceptual domain of this symbol, which revolved around maize, agricultural fertility, and a burgeoning iconography of kingship (Fields 1989, 1991).

A variety of Preclassic objects attest to a sustained interest in sensory faculties. Their diversity, from figurines to larger stone monuments, suggests that people of vastly different social classes had access to objects that displayed animate beings who “spoke” or “heard.” This increased interest in sensory capabilities and animate qualities complemented an expanded repertoire of characters in figurine assemblages from the Pacific slope region by the Middle Preclassic Conchas phase (Rosenswig 2011: 259). These points are important to stress, as they speak to the social significance of these representations, which may have extended well beyond the quotidian. Animated objects, Susan Stewart (1993: 57) argued, engage with narrative time and provide entrée into temporal worlds beyond those of everyday life.

Discussion

The contexts from which Early and Middle figurines are recovered – domestic and communal, elite and commoner – are as varied as the characters represented in the assemblages. This variability surely speaks to the potency of figurines in a variety of situations and settings and their role as objects that permeated physical or architectural boundaries. Specifying exactly what role they played within these various spaces, however, is difficult to do. Preclassic figurines have been interpreted as objects invoked in rites associated with pivotal life-history moments, stages in the life cycle, and the creation and negotiation of individual and group social identity (Cyphers 1993; Grove and Gillespie 1984; R. Joyce 2003; Lesure 1997, 1999; Rice 2015; S. Scott n.d.). Other scholars have viewed them as indicative of ancestor veneration (Flannery and Marcus 1976; Grove and

Gillespie 2002; Marcus 1998, 1999, 2009; Marcus and Flannery 1994), curing and disease prevention (Follensbee 2000), or fertility cults (Rands and Rands 1965), or commented on their role in building dedication rites (Flannery and Marcus 2005: 159; 2015: 266–271; Marcus 2018). Still others have suggested that figurines served as toys (Plunket 2002: 7; Willey 1972: 13) or mementos from pilgrimages (Grennes-Ravitz and Coleman 1976: 205).⁵³

Joyce (2009: 421) concluded that such conflicting understandings are a “much needed reminder that figurines, in fragments or complete, singly or in groups, were and thus are open to many different interpretations” (also see Blomster 2009; Lesure 1997: 228–229; Marcus 2018; Talalay 1993: 38). More than fifty years ago, Lee (1967: 214) had cautioned that it would be senseless to search for one general function for figurines, as they surely served diverse purposes throughout the history of Mesoamerica. Figurines elude, Lesure (2011: 112–115) concluded, any “universalist” interpretation. Kuijt (2017: 562) neatly summarized the situation, noting that researchers “do not necessarily understand how past ideas were materialized in the construction of figurines” and are “challenged by the coexistence of the multiple potential messages and meanings that can be generated with the use and display of clay figurines.”

There are workarounds. Joyce (1993: 257) called attention to the fact that Early and Middle Preclassic figurines, although “single, still images,” do not carry a “unitary inherent meaning.” Instead, this meaning can shift, be redefined, or refocused when one figurine is placed in dialogue with others, or even moved between spaces. Figurines, she argued, draw attention to specific dimensions of social differentiation that hinge on “relations of similarity and relations of difference.” Joyce (2003: 258) maintained that Preclassic figurines were equally engaged with notions of social decorum, or behaviors that were socially defined and delimited. As she phrased it, “[f]orming the clay into its final shape was effectively a metaphor for the shaping of the actual substance of the human body that was a significant part of socialization” (R. Joyce 2003: 259; also see Talalay 1993). People are, Chris Fowler (2004) insisted, composite and multi-authored; why, if we concede that people are not “single, still images,” do we not extend the same courtesy to figurines? Cases where Preclassic figurines have been found in dialogue with one another, as at San José Mogote (Fig. 3.5) or Takalik Abaj (Schieber de Lavarreda 2016), illustrate this especially well, as do comparable groupings of small stone figurines at La Venta (in Offering 4; see Magaloni and Filloy 2013) and large stone monuments at La Venta and San Lorenzo.

Phenomenological theories of embodiment have opened new avenues of investigation for figurines (Long 2011). Generally speaking, phenomenological approaches link figural representations of the human body to ancient concepts of the body as a thinking and feeling entity (Joyce 2000b). Figurines provided touchstones for evaluating one's self while simultaneously enabling the construction and contestation of a range of social identities.⁵⁴ As Long (2011: 105) phrased it, "[s]ince figurines were formed by the very peoples scholars would like to understand, they present an internal vantage point, from which we might glimpse how ancient Mesoamericans visualized themselves, their bodily experiences, and their relationships to others."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, figurines are less a reflection of "actual" life than objects "embedded in the process of constituting a world people inhabit" (after Nanoglou 2008a: 2 and Meskell 2017: 18). It is quite likely that Preclassic figurines were used to construct many different types of rituals, stories, or lessons, through which relationships were established between the figurines and those engaged in their use. They speak directly to

issues concerning individuals, but also social collectives, and the many points of intersection between (Guernsey and Love 2019). At the risk of anticipating my arguments in Chapters 5 and 6, I would suggest that figurines, both as wholes and as fragments, littered throughout the domestic and public spaces of many sites, are especially powerful indicators of the complexity of social relationships in Preclassic Mesoamerica.

Figurines may have carried, as Meskell (2007: 139–140) argued for ancient Turkey, more symbolic weight than their much larger and heavier stone counterparts. They were "ever present," to borrow Bailey's (2007: 117) words, "saturat[ing] communities with specific images/senses of being human." They were part of "a framework for the rearticulation of the fields of social action and subject formation" (Meskell 2015: 18, citing Nanoglou 2008b). On the most fundamental of levels, figurines were key protagonists in Early and Middle Preclassic figured worlds and a vital node within the web of intervisual materiality.

Figurines at Middle Preclassic La Blanca

In this chapter, I turn to the ceramic figurines with which I am most familiar: those from the Middle Preclassic site of La Blanca, where I have worked for well over a decade. To date, more than 5,000 figurines have been recovered at La Blanca, which flourished during the Conchas phase (1000–600 BC) and controlled “a regional system that was much larger and more hierarchically structured than anything previously seen” along the Pacific Coast of Guatemala (Love 2007: 288–289; Love and Rosenswig n.d.). It maintained its prominence for close to 300 years, covered more than 300 ha at its peak, and boasted some of the earliest monumental architecture in Mesoamerica (Love 1991, 2002a, 2002c, 2007; Love and Guernsey 2006, 2011). Archaeological investigations directed by Michael Love since 1983 have documented a significant influx of population at La Blanca from adjacent regions during the Middle Preclassic period, which fueled a marked mobilization of labor that resulted in massive architectural constructions.¹

The sociopolitical and economic transformations that characterized La Blanca over the course of its history most certainly affected its residents in any number of ways. Excavations have demonstrated significant social differentiation at the household level. Elite households are marked by high densities of prestige goods such as jade, mica jewelry, and fine paste ceramics, as well as higher densities of obsidian and obsidian cores, which suggests that elites controlled long-distance exchange (Love 1991, 2007: 289). With regard to figurines, evidence indicates that households of all ranks utilized solid clay figurines with great frequency.² Karleen Ronsairo (2016) demonstrated, however, that although figurines were accessible to people from across the socioeconomic spectrum at La Blanca, figurine densities were greater in elite households.

Most figurines at La Blanca come from households and, more specifically, household trash middens, which

suggests that they represent the residual of domestic ritual or other household activity (Arroyo 2002; Love and Guernsey 2006; Rosenswig 2010: 186–187). But figurines also appear in civic or non-residential spaces, usually in secondary contexts of structural fill composed of discarded domestic refuse including broken ceramics, animal bone, obsidian fragments, and shattered *manos* and *metates*. For example, the fill of massive Mound 1 at La Blanca, which once stood more than 25 m in height, contains hundreds of figurine fragments and other domestic detritus (Love and Guernsey 2011). Although it would be difficult, if not impossible, to prove, I would suggest, following Blomster (2009), that the presence of figurines in this massive public structure points to a form of community engagement. The fragments of bodily representations, which likely came from many different households, symbolically represented the people who had used them. It is hard to imagine that so many figurine fragments just happened to be swept over to the vicinity of Mound 1, where they were incorporated into its fill solely to increase volume (although that possibility cannot be ruled out). I am prone to believing that they, like other vestiges of daily life, indexed in a deliberate and meaningful way the very people who had made and utilized them in their everyday lives.

Figurines appear to have been modeled and formed in various ways at La Blanca. A number of them demonstrate that, at times, bodies were assembled from individual pieces of clay, which were formed separately and then joined to form a complete body, including a head, before firing. Some bodies have a solid clay core, to which costume elements, details of anatomy, and limbs were attached (Fig. 4.1a, b). Seams were smoothed over with clay to completely disguise the inner core and lend an appearance of a singular piece of fired clay. A cross section of the stomach and belt of the fragmentary figurine illustrated in Figure 4.1a and b demonstrates this clearly: one can see the inner lump of clay and an outer layer, which was used to mold the belt, the smooth skin of the stomach, and the lightly incised navel. Heads also appear to have been formed in a similar manner, with a ball of clay forming the inner core over which a thin sheet of clay, used to model details of the face, was placed. In a few cases, fragmentary heads reveal a tenon at their base (Fig. 4.1c), which would have been inserted into a body before firing. There is no indication that these tenons accommodated movement; instead, they appear to have been employed so as to firmly affix the head to the body before firing (also see Pinzón 2011: fig. 4.1).³

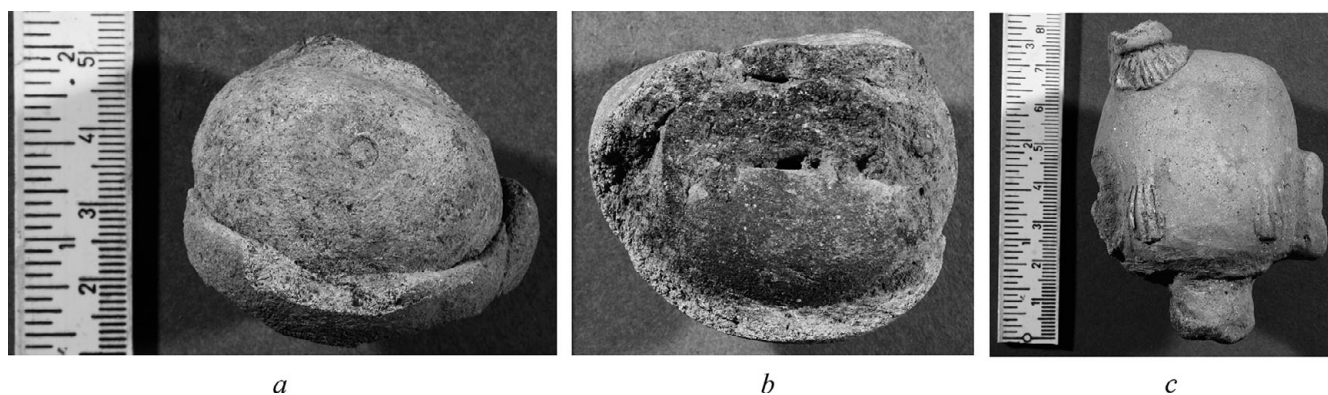


Figure 4.1 Fragmentary La Blanca figurines demonstrating methods of construction: (a) torso showing stomach and belt/costuming (SM-32-6-22-178); (b) base of same torso showing where legs were broken off and revealing inner core ball of clay and thin band of clay used to model costume detailing; (c) view of head, from the back, showing tenon that would have anchored the head to the figurine's body (SM-32-5-7-86). Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

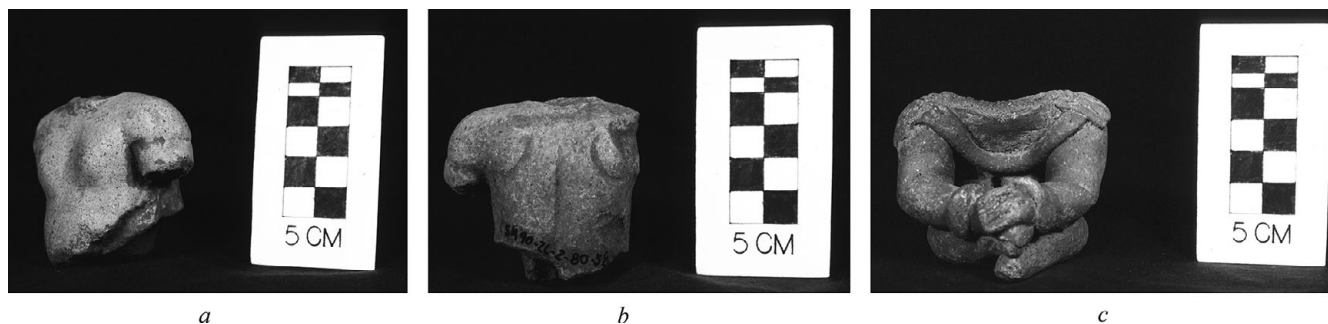


Figure 4.2 Figurines from La Blanca showing modeling and body postures: (a) front view of torso fragment (SM-90-26-2-80-58); (b) back view of same torso; (c) view of seated figure (SM-90-26-5-220-82). Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

The human form dominates the assemblage of La Blanca figurines (Arroyo 2002: 205), although animals and zoomorphic creatures, some exceedingly fanciful, also exist.⁴ Arroyo concluded that there were more female bodies represented at La Blanca than male, but also noted that a significant percentage could not be securely identified.⁵ Few complete figurines exist at La Blanca. Arroyo (2002: 205, 222) observed that most heads are missing bodies, and most bodies are lacking heads, which makes any secure correlation between types of heads and types of bodies difficult to determine. Some bodies, even in a fragmentary state, reveal subtle modeling (Fig. 4.2a, b). In cases like these, the artisan had very clearly studied the human form, painstakingly rendering naturalistic details of anatomy and musculoskeletal structure.

Postures also vary and include seated figures, some of which strike arresting poses as in the case of one whose hands were placed, one on top of the other, over carefully crossed legs (Fig. 4.2c). Other standing figures, such as an anthropomorphic bird (see Guernsey 2006b: fig. 4.8), cannot stand independently, which suggests that they

were carried or supported in some way.⁶ Meskell (2007: 148) argued that the inability of figurines to stand unaided is evidence that they were “not static” objects but “incorporated into practice, a moving and mobile suite of embodied actions.”

“Tab” Figurines and Issues of Gender, Identity, and Absence

Arroyo’s (2002: fig. 119) Type 9 figurine demonstrates the acute difficulties in determining the gender of certain types of Middle Preclassic figurines (Fig. 4.3).⁷ Coe (1961: 112–115, fig. 58d) first identified this type of figurine at the site of La Victoria, located less than 10 km from La Blanca. He referred to it as a “Tab” figurine due to its form, which consists of an anthropomorphic lower body that extends upward into a long-tapered tab that substitutes for a head. Long (2011: 22), in his thesis on the more than 300 Tab figurines found at La Blanca to date, noted that they are distributed across households of all

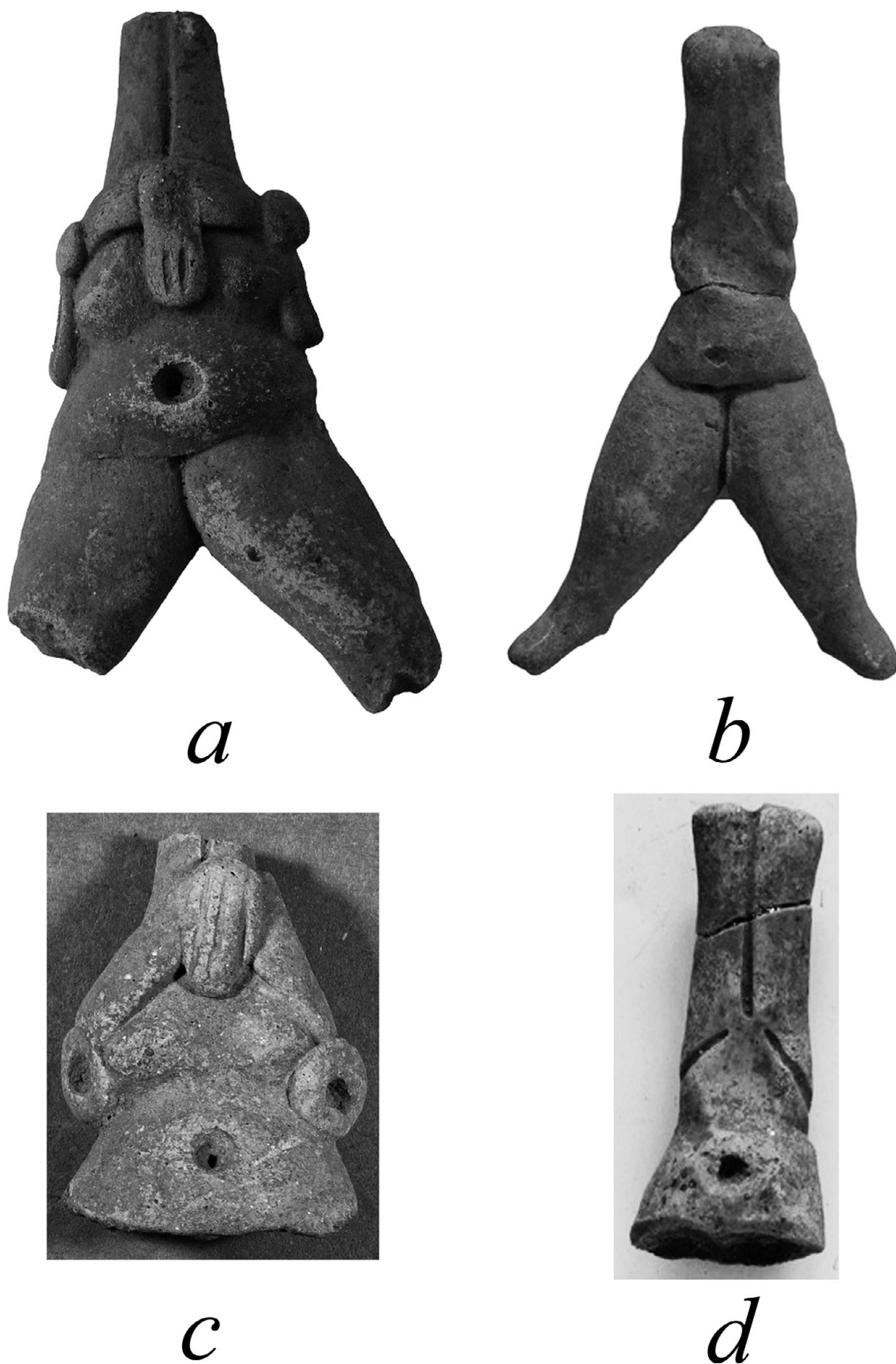


Figure 4.3 Tab figurines at La Blanca: (a) SM-34-7-8-137 (8.5 cm height); (b) SM-37-3-20A-174 (12 cm height); (c) SM-34-4-7-99 (5 cm height); (d) SM-37-1-16B-247 (6 cm height). Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

rank. The tab portion of the figurines is typically incised with a vertical slit running its length, sometimes accompanied by a chevron at its base and a cleft at the tip. Long linked this motif to Middle Preclassic maize symbolism but also suggested that sexual references may be implied through a rhetorical double-take: the shafts of the Tab figurines are distinctly phallic, but other details suggest labial folds (Fig. 4.4). Long (2011: 108–124) also proposed that the exaggerated sexual forms of the Tab figurines invoked humor, which may have served as a powerful vehicle for social commentary. In modern Maya stories, hard objects like stone pestles carry phallic connotations and often inspire sexual innuendo (Chinchilla 2017: 114). The presence of both male and female sexual characteristics in Tab figurines might just as readily speak to an interest in categories of identity beyond those of a binarized society (Meskell 2017: 27).

In spite of a strikingly consistent form, each Tab figurine possesses idiosyncratic details or adornment. A number of them possess, on their upper portion, decorative fillets like those on the headdresses or coiffures of other figurines at La Blanca (Fig. 4.3a, c) or display ear-pools at the base of the headdress (Fig. 4.3c). Yet the most salient aspect of Tab figurines – and their most dramatic focal point – is the *absence* of a face (Long 2011: 23), a characteristic that led Arroyo (2002: 234) to describe them as “hidden head” forms.

While the lack of faces on the Tab figurines makes them enigmatic, it does not make them unique. A figurine – the earliest found to date in Mesoamerica – from Tlapacoya-Zohapilco in a pre-pottery Archaic context anticipates the Tab figurines to some degree (Niederberger 2000: fig. 4). It shares with them an anthropomorphic lower body, from which rises an extended shaft that includes what might represent eyes

or facial features, although a mouth is entirely lacking. Niederberger (2000: 177) noted that the “muteness” and columnar body of the Tlapacoya-Zohapilco object compare to figurines from early Neolithic Eurasia. Clearly an interest in figurines that emphasize – or de-emphasize – certain sensory or expressive capabilities is ancient and broadly shared across the globe. Bailey (2007: 111) noted that, while the artists who crafted Neolithic Balkan figurines might elide facial details and, sometimes, heads entirely, they never chose to disregard or omit body parts like hands, feet, or legs. The practice of omitting faces, he argued, runs counter to our instincts: as psychologists have proven, faces provide the most potent visual foundation for recognizing individuals.

Bailey’s point was to draw attention to the “representational importance of absence” or, as Stewart (1993: 27) put it, the ability of a subject to be “formed from the pattern of its absences.” Bailey viewed absence as distinct from fragmentation, in which a piece of a figurine’s body is broken off and removed (practices performed around the world and discussed more fully in the following chapter). In representational absence, key features or body parts have been omitted from the moment of conception, and this absence is highlighted by the fact that the remaining body – the context for the missing feature – remains fully intact (Bailey 2007: 114). This is certainly true with Tab figurines, or at least the three for which we have intact bodies including lower extremities (Fig. 4.3a, b). The anthropomorphic bodies, with exaggerated navels, robust thighs, and swelling breasts, provide a fleshy and fundamentally human counterpoint to the abstract heads. The Tab figurines share this body type with other distinct types of figurines at La Blanca that, unlike the Tabs, typically adopt a seated posture (Fig. 4.5).⁸ The Tab figurines’ combination of missing faces and standardized bodies is compelling: the “open slate” of the tab heads contrasts with a body type that is

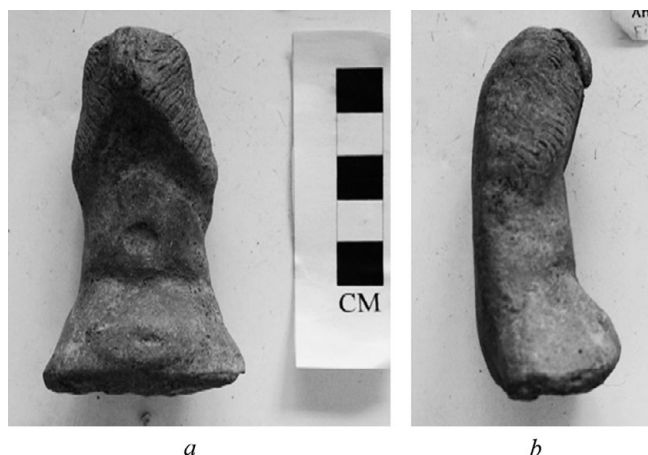


Figure 4.4 Tab figurine with phallic shape, front and profile views (SM-37-3-R168–13-94). Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

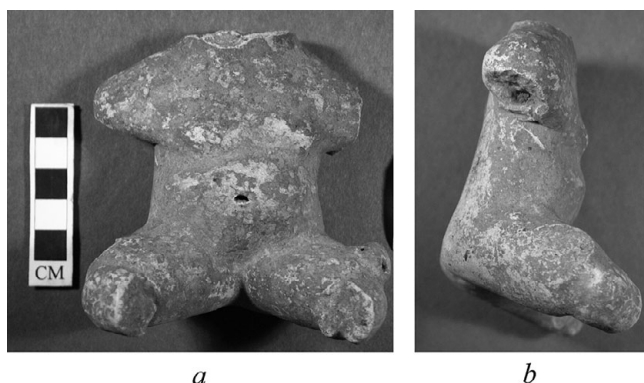


Figure 4.5 La Blanca figurine (SM-34-7-R91A-143): (a) front view; (b) profile view. Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

homogeneous, and which links them to other representations at La Blanca and the greater social whole (following Bailey 2005: 200). Tabs might also, to an interesting end, be thought of as simulacra in Michael Camille's (2003: 25; also see Baudrillard 1994) sense of the term. For Camille, simulacra "threaten the very notion of representation itself" because they "subvert the cherished dichotomy of model and copy ... original and likeness." Simulacra "disturb the order of priority" and assumptions that "the image must be secondary to, or come after, its model." Tabs do appear to subvert the dichotomy of model and copy, repeating a head form, hundreds of times, that references other Tab figurines more than any human prime object.

Tab figurines also remind us that any miniature object must, by necessity, exclude some features (Bailey 2005, 2007: 112). But absence, Bailey (2007: 113–114) argued, also invites inference and provides a "stimulus for thought"; viewers are "drawn, almost without realizing it, to think of what is not there, of what has been left out." These inferences, different for each individual, also lead to multiple potential interpretations. Neolithic and Mesoamerican artisans were not alone in recognizing the potential of absence. Bailey noted that this tactic was equally critical to early modernist painters such as Édouard Manet, who, as Linda Nochlin (1994) discussed, frequently cropped many of the figures in his paintings, intentionally portraying only a fragment of their bodies. This practice, like that for figurines, requires the viewer to "complete" the image.

Bailey's ideas can be readily extended to the Tab figurines. The missing or shrouded heads created "a representational vacuum" and likely became "sites of extraordinary power within the constitution of meaning in definitions of identity, self and personhood" (Bailey 2007: 114). The responses of observers would have drawn on their previous experiences, in all their diversity and richness. Understood in this way, Tab figurines are "anti-rhetorical": they neither persuade nor convince, but generate multiple interpretations and, because of this, have the potential to disrupt (Bailey 2007: 117).

As alluring as Bailey's theories might be, one could just as easily argue that Tab figurines quelled aspects of identity and limited expression of individual variation through the shrouding, blinding, and silencing of the heads. Kuijt and Chesson (2007: 222) interpreted increased ambiguity and masking in figurines from Neolithic Italy as a mechanism whereby individual differentiation was limited at a time of significant social transformations. Certainly, equally significant social transformations characterized Middle Preclassic La Blanca, and we are wise to entertain all possibilities. Regardless

of which interpretation is more correct, the unusual features of the Tabs are key to their social significance: even if designed to suppress identity, the absence of features surely generated discussion of some sort. Although today we read the Tab figurines as repetitive in their anonymity, no two are alike, and the unique elements that each possesses hint at some, albeit subtle, interest in individuality.⁹ And, while Tabs deny the capacity for vision to the figurines themselves, they, perhaps ironically, prioritize the vision of the viewer. If seeing is power, then it is the viewer, the user of the figurines, who is empowered.

Sensory Capacity

Eyes and Vision

Tab figurines, whose shrouded forms obscure the head, contrast with most figurines at La Blanca that display an overt emphasis on faces and sensory engagement. Vision is often prominently featured: the eyes of figurines at La Blanca are often quite large and take a variety of shapes (Fig. 4.6). During the Conchas phase there was an increased attention paid to the pupils of eyes, which at La Blanca typically include punched irises (Arroyo 2002: 208; Pinzón 2011: 77, fig. 6.1; Rosenswig 2011: 258). Their communicative potential is impressive, as comparison of the three very different types of eyes illustrated in Figure 4.6 demonstrates. In each, eyes are paired with other expressive features including arched eyebrows or forehead creases, all of which serve to animate the faces.

Alfredo López Austin (1988: 170–177) addressed the significance of sensory capacity for ancient Mesoamericans; senses, from seeing and smelling to hearing, evidence "certain kind[s] of consciousness." Following in his footsteps, Joyce (1998: 161) urged scholars to recognize, in Mesoamerican representational systems, the ways in which parts of the face, in particular, served as vehicles for expressing sensory engagement. Houston and Taube (2000: 264) argued that sensory capacity in ancient Mesoamerica was akin to perception and higher-order cognition. Vision was also procreative, they argued, an "agentive" act equated in the sixteenth-century K'iche' Maya Popol Vuh to increasing one's knowledge. Sight was as cognitive and intellectual as it was physical, they asserted. In hieroglyphic texts composed during the Classic period, acts of witnessing were credited to overlords or visitors, people of significant social status whose ability to "see" events also, by extension, denoted their authority (Houston and Taube 2000: 287). The new Conchas-phase attention to particularly expressive eyes and vision, demonstrated by figurines at La Blanca

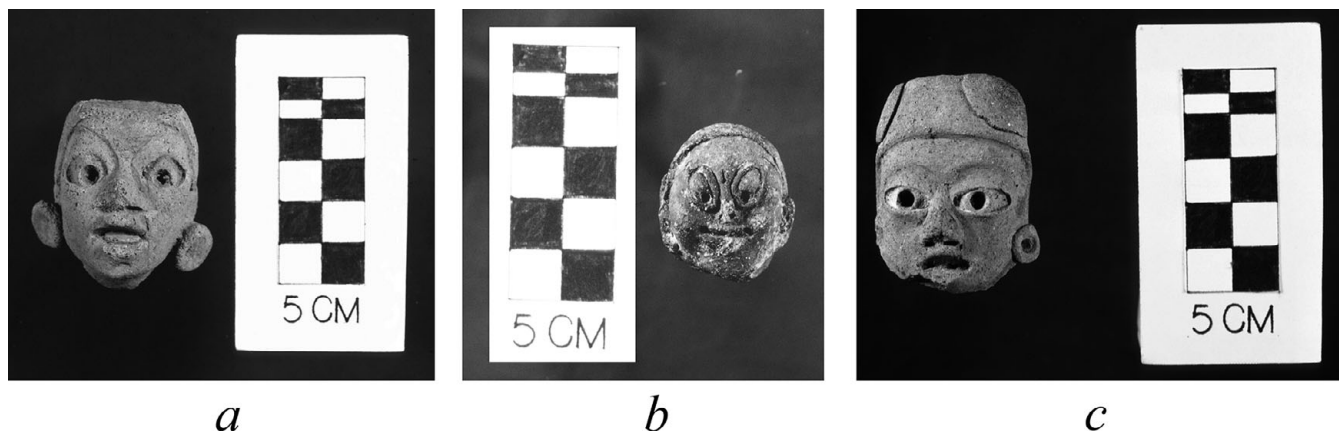


Figure 4.6 La Blanca figurines emphasizing eyes and capacity for vision: (a) SM-90-26-1-190-49; (b) SM-90-27-2-290A-123; (c) SM-90-27-3-170-102). Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

and elsewhere, suggests that acts of seeing and witnessing may have been important to record. Examples like those in [Figure 4.6](#) stand in stark contrast to the Tab figurines, which are defined by their inability to see and participate fully in acts of cognition. Both of these things – sensory capacity or a lack thereof – were vividly articulated throughout the corpus of figurines at La Blanca.

Mouths, Exhalations, and Vocalization

Attention was also paid to the mouths of figurines at La Blanca ([Fig. 4.7](#)). Rosenswig interpreted the open mouths of figurines from the Early Preclassic Soconusco as indicative of some form of vocalization.¹⁰ He observed that significant attention was likewise extended to the ears of the figurines, which were crafted “minimally by a vertical appliqué fillet and maximally with earspools and detailed carving of the outer ear” (Rosenwig 2011: 256, fig. 11.4). He took this to mean that the implied vocalizations were intended to be heard. This new attention to mouths and ears, Rosenswig argued, indicated an increased emphasis on vocality and auralty in the latter part of the Early Preclassic period (see, for similar ideas focused on monumental art traditions, Houston et al. 2006).

These same sensibilities persevered into the Middle Preclassic period. Most La Blanca figurines have open mouths or at the very least parted lips, and many also display red paint that appears to have been deliberately placed around mouths and lips ([Figs. 4.7a, c, d, 4.8a, b](#)). Mouths were not the only body part highlighted by the application of red pigment, however: ears, cheeks, foreheads, hair ornaments, and occasionally the entire face, headdress, or hair of figurines were painted, as were portions of the chest, the navel, and appendages at times

(Arroyo 2002: 205, 209, 224). The figurine in [Figure 4.8a](#) and [b](#) exemplifies this. A relatively wide band of red paint encompasses the eye region, extends to a single vertical segment of the headdress, and also appears in between the parted lips. While I have been unable to discern clear patterns in the application of paint within the corpus of La Blanca figurines, heads appear to display a greater frequency of red pigmentation than bodies. Flory Pinzón (2011: 133–135) reached a similar conclusion, noting that 77 percent of the La Blanca heads in her sample possessed red pigmentation, compared with only 39 percent of bodies (also see Ronsairo 2016: 38). When red pigment or, more rarely, white pigment appears on bodies, Pinzón added, it appears to be decorative or targets joints and points of articulation.¹¹

The use of red pigment to highlight faces and bodies is not exclusive to figurines and hints at intervisual patterns of meaning shared with objects made of other materials. Tate (2012: 128) reported that the mouth of Middle Preclassic Teopantecuanitlan Monument 2, one of four inverted T-shaped zoomorphic sculptures lining a sunken courtyard, is marked with red pigment. Ponciano Ortiz and María del Carmen Rodríguez (1999: 237) noted that, in some cases, the mouths of wooden busts at El Manatí revealed traces of red paint. Perhaps even more interestingly, MatthewLooper (2014: 415) observed that red paint around the mouths and on the bodies and appendages of some Eb phase (1000–700 BC) figurines at Tikal (Laporte and Fialko 1995: fig. 5) anticipates that seen on the Late Preclassic female figures vividly painted on the north wall of Las Pinturas Structure Sub-1 at San Bartolo (see Saturno et al. 2005).¹²

Application of pigment is not the only indicator of a persistent attention to mouths at La Blanca. A number of figurines reveal consistent damage to that region of the

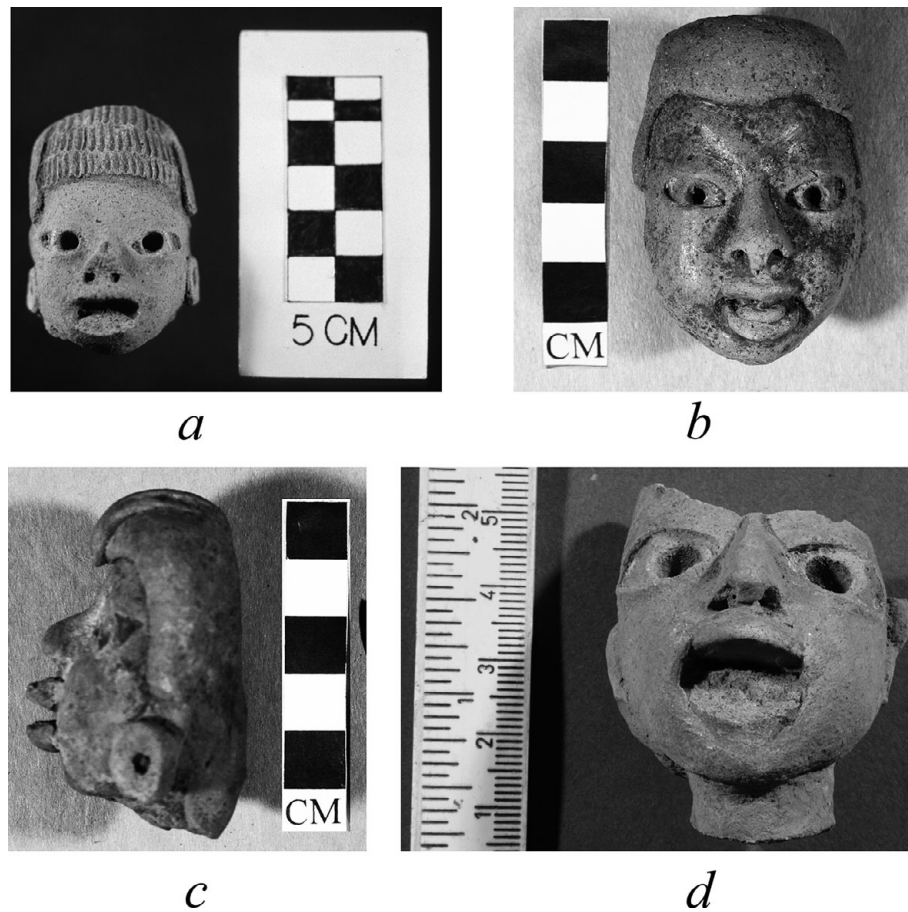


Figure 4.7 La Blanca figurines emphasizing mouths and capacity for breath or vocalization: (a) SM-90-26-5-227-136; (b) SM-28-2-12-302; (c) SM-28-2-4-354; (d) SM-32-7-11-62. Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

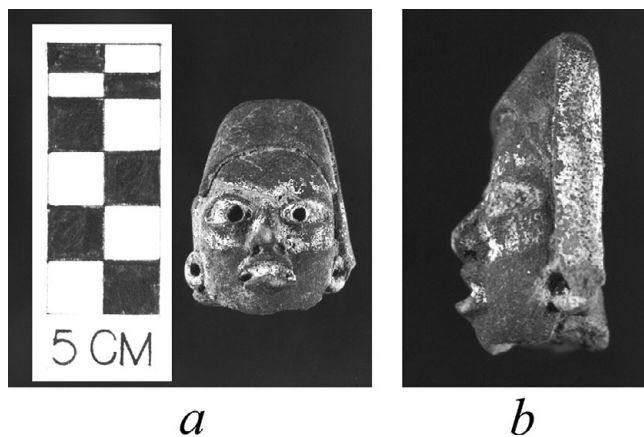


Figure 4.8 Red pigment on La Blanca figurine: (a) frontal view of head (SM-90-27-2-200A-341) with red bands of paint around eyes and in mouth (and white paint in eye cavities); (b) profile view of same head, with vertical red band running down side of headdress. Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

face, which Arroyo (2002: 205, 209–210) interpreted as evidence of deliberate blows to the mouths (Fig. 4.9). Similar conclusions were reached by Coe (1961: 92) for figurines at nearby La Victoria as well as by Marcus for

figurines in the Valley of Oaxaca. Marcus (1998: 312) suggested that such defacement or intentional battering might have been done to objects that were no longer needed by a household, or in order to ritually kill the figurine and preclude the possibility that it could be (re) used by someone from outside the household. Evidence of targeted mutilation like this is important to note, as it relates to ideas that I develop more fully in the following chapter. It leads one to wonder what conceptual correlation, if any, this sort of mutilation to mouths shared with the equally mute Tab figurines. Targeted damage also provides insight into the many different ways people interacted with figurines during their use lives. It also anticipates patterns of behavior in later periods: Houston and Taube (2000: 283) and Bryan Just (2005: 78) described the targeted mutilation of eyes, noses, and faces present in many examples of Classic Maya sculpture.

Other figurines at La Blanca very clearly highlight the mouth as a site of exhalation or vocalization and, in this way, parallel Preclassic monuments that feature a similar emphasis (Guernsey 2010a, 2012). One beautifully

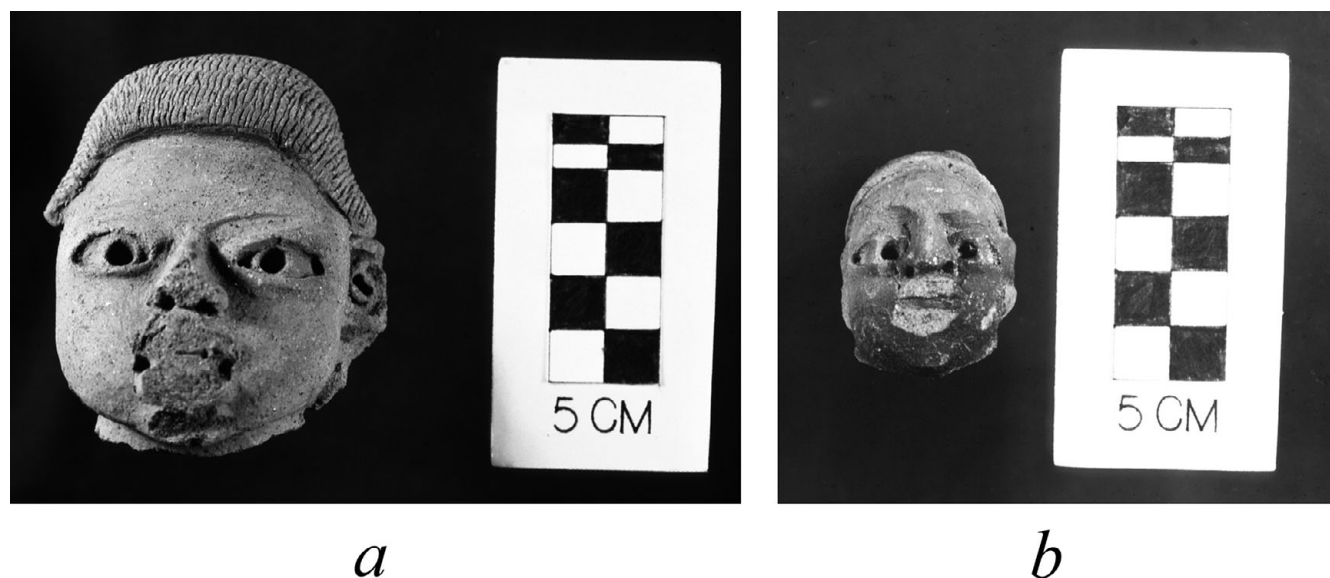


Figure 4.9 Damage to mouths on La Blanca figurines: (a) SM-90-26-5-220-79; (b) SM-90-27-3-130-142. Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

burnished figurine tilts its head back and raises its arms as if to insert its hands into its mouth in an expressive but enigmatic gesture (Fig. 4.10a).¹³ In another example, the individual's hands are also raised to its mouth as if to prevent any air or sound from escaping its dramatically inflated cheeks (Fig. 4.10b) (Guernsey and Love 2008). Interestingly, an emphasis on breath or orality is sometimes accompanied by a de-emphasis on vision, particularly on a type of figurine characterized by consistently puffy facial features and closed, heavy-lidded eyes (Figs. 4.10c, 4.17a, 4.20b). One example from La Blanca, which functioned as a whistle, perfectly exemplifies these contrasts: the eyes of the individual are covered by heavy lids, but its pursed lips seem poised to whistle (Fig. 4.10c, d).¹⁴ A similar example, also a whistle, comes from Chalcatzingo and emphasizes similarly distended cheeks and closed eyes (Grove 1984: 88–105, plate 65).

Other whistles that highlight anthropomorphic faces with distended cheeks come from sites in the Maya Lowlands, the Guatemalan Highlands, and Oaxaca, and appear to be linked to an iconography of breath, sound, ritual, and performance that persevered throughout Mesoamerican history (Guernsey 2012: 107–109, 134; Hepp et al. 2014; Houston and Taube 2000; Houston et al. 2006; López Austin 1988: 169–172). During the Preclassic period, this iconography was closely associated with ancestors and, eventually, attestations of rank and authority. In fact, the trajectory through time of this suite of attributes indicates a gradual appropriation of iconography from the realm of community activity, in the form of figurines, to that of public, elite sculpture, as

I demonstrated in an earlier study (Guernsey 2012: 134–143).¹⁵

Other figurines at La Blanca render tiny well-modeled tongues and painstakingly formed rows of teeth along the upper gum, visible inside parted lips (Fig. 4.11a). Pinzón (2011: 79, figs. 6.5, 6.6) suggested that these details, which highlight the interiors of mouths, allude to the capacity to talk or eat. Such an interest, so vividly illustrated in the corpus of La Blanca figurines, seems not to have persisted, at least in relationship to human representations: Andrew Scherer (2015: 32–33) noted that, in the Maya Lowlands during the Classic period, teeth are rarely included in depictions of human beings but, instead, appear with greater regularity in representations of supernaturals in the form of large, projecting central incisors.

Noses and Breath

The nose, as another critical site of respiration, was also often emphasized at La Blanca through the addition of carefully punched nostrils. Other figurines exhibit solid spheres of clay beneath the nose, which appear to depict ornaments of some kind and also likely symbolized breath emanating from the nostrils in the form of a bubble or bead (Fig. 4.11b) (Pinzón 2011: 132–133). This same attribute appears on representations carved in stone, as in the case of La Venta Stela 19 (Fig. 4.11c) (Houston and Taube 2000: fig. 3a). In later periods, these beads appear in association with both noses and mouths, in either case marking the “breathy” orifices of the face.¹⁶ Within the corpus of Preclassic figurines, however, breath was not an

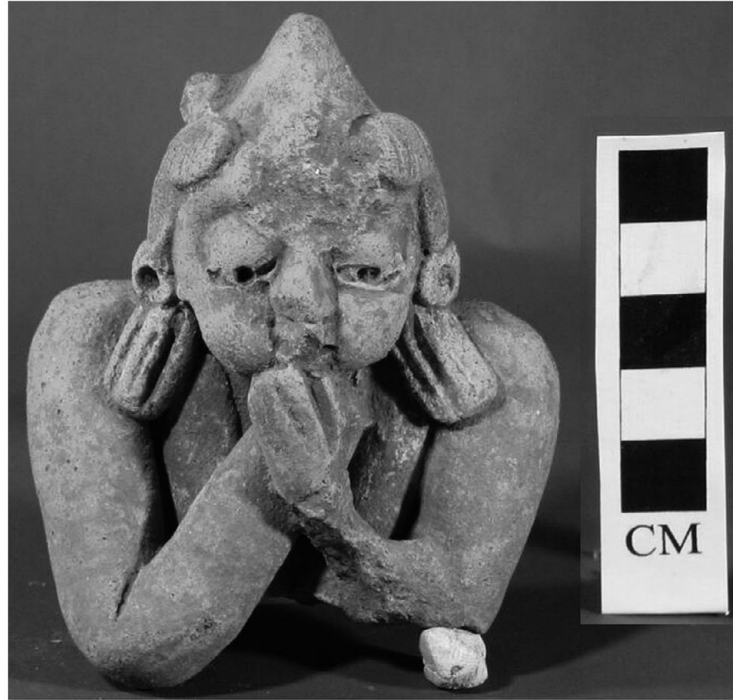
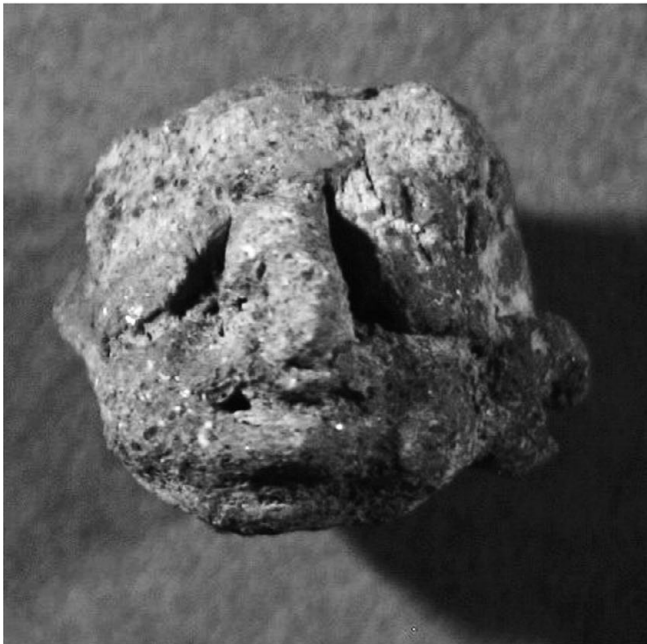
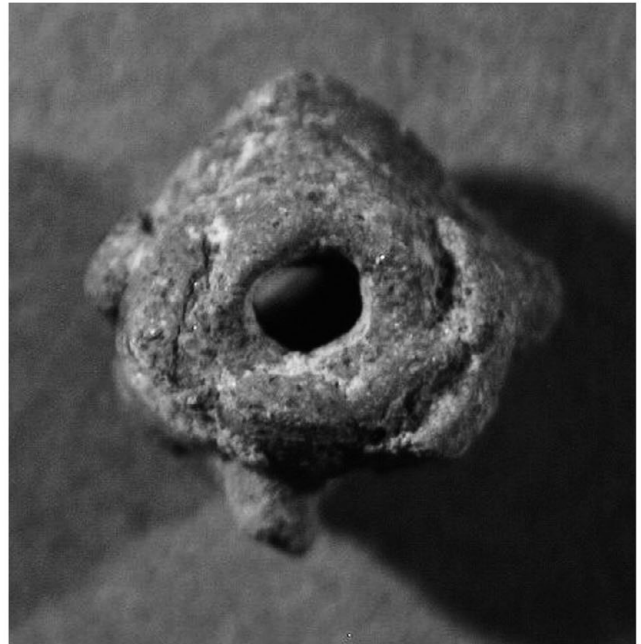
*a**b**c**d*

Figure 4.10 La Blanca figurines highlighting mouth as point of exhalation or vocalization: (a) nearly complete highly burnished figurine with hands to mouth (SM 32-7-12-83, 6.5 cm height); (b) figurine with puffy cheeks and hands clasped to mouth (SM-34-5-R89-257); (c) puffy-faced whistle, front view (SM-32-6-25-226, 1.75 cm height); (d) puffy-faced whistle, top view. Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

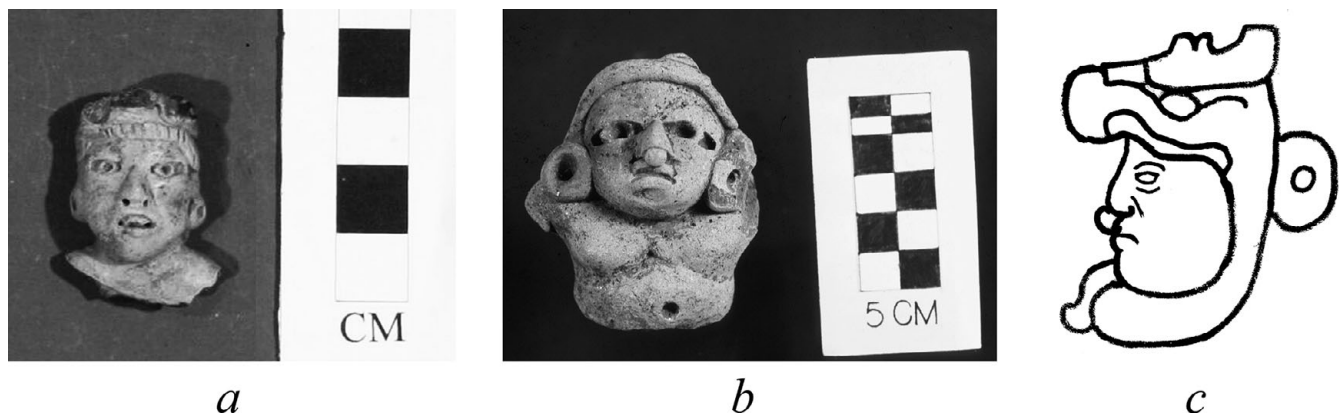


Figure 4.11 Alternative emphases on mouths, noses, exhalation, and vocalization: (a) La Blanca figurine with teeth (SM-33-03-01-1209); (b) La Blanca figurine with breath bead in nose (SM-90-26-65-R27-8); (c) La Venta Stela 9, detail of face with breath bead. Photos (a) and (b) courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project; drawing (c) by author after Houston and Taube (2000: fig. 3a)



Figure 4.12 Exhalations and vocalizations on La Blanca animal figurines: (a) avian with possible breath bead at end of beak (SM-32-6-26-224); (b) quacking duck (SM-33-1-4-765). Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

attribute limited to humans (Guernsey and Love 2008). Animals at La Blanca also possess what might represent breath beads, perched at the ends of snouts and beaks (Fig. 4.12a). This iconographic overlap between humans and animals, which often display additional anthropomorphic features and costuming, highlights a persistent concern with animal–human relationships in ancient Mesoamerican figuration (Brown and Walker 2008; Brown and Emery 2008). One example illustrates this particularly well. The gesture made by human figurines at La Blanca, in which hands are raised to mouths (Fig. 4.10a, b), compares to one made by coatimundis on figurines at La Blanca and whistles at Tres Zapotes (see Weiant 1943: plate 50) and Uaxactun (see Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: fig. 140).¹⁷ This theme of paws clasping snouts eventually superseded the boundaries of figurines, appearing as well in the form of small-scale stone sculpture (Guernsey and Love 2008; Guernsey et al. 2017).¹⁸

Quite simply, it would be inaccurate to characterize breathiness or orality as a trait unique to human representations in Preclassic figurine traditions: animals, too, were visualized with this same capacity in imaginative ways. A tiny duck figurine from La Blanca, pierced for

suspension, is animated by a wide-open beak that suggests it is loudly quacking (Fig. 4.12b). Found in the fill of La Blanca Mound 1, it combines both avian and anthropomorphic attributes, including human arms and a protruding belly marked with a navel. The head of a similar duck figurine with anthropomorphic features and earpools was also found in excavations in the Mound 9 residential precinct (Guernsey and Love 2008). These animated duck figurines may be linked to the iconography of duck-billed individuals that I described in Chapter 3, and which in later years was associated with wind gods. Yet, at La Blanca, there is great variation among these avian characters, and ascertaining which species they represent is difficult. Ducks, turkeys, songbirds, and even a pelican appear to be represented (Arroyo 2002: 233). Some of the La Blanca bird figurines also functioned as whistles, much like those documented by Hepp (2007: 56) for the Early Preclassic Lower Río Verde Valley of Oaxaca. He stressed the mimetic nature of these objects, in which the whistle was both visually and acoustically representational: “Whistles serve as an example of mimetically seeking to capture the essence of something, as they not only look, but also *sound* like the creatures they represented” (emphasis in original). He noted, too, that an Olmec roller stamp portrays a bird emitting a vocal stream that contains early hieroglyphs (Pohl et al. 2002), which suggests that an association between birds and speech existed from very early on in Mesoamerica. It would endure, too: birds serve as “messengers” in the iconography of the Classic and colonial periods (Houston et al. 2006: 229–251). At La Blanca, the animated quacking or singing implied by the open beaks – at times made functionally possible through the whistle construction – suggests a similar emphasis on sounding or utterances, which matched that of their human counterparts.

Ears, Earspools, and Hearing

As I mentioned above, Soconusco figurines displayed a new attention to ears by the close of the Early Preclassic period, which coincided with a more pronounced focus on open mouths and implied vocalizations (Rosenswig 2011: 256). At Middle Preclassic La Blanca ears continued to be given due emphasis, as abundantly clear on a figurine displaying a carefully modeled auricle and anti-helix (Fig. 4.13a). More often, however, earspools receive far more elaboration than ears, in some cases seeming to substitute for them (Fig. 4.13b, c). This emphasis on

earspools was not a figment of artisans' imaginations but, in fact, accords well with the archaeological record at La Blanca in which thousands of earspool fragments, and a handful of complete examples, have been recovered from the same domestic refuse contexts as the figurines themselves (Arroyo 2002: 212; Love 1991).¹⁹

In still other cases, as with an exquisitely detailed figurine (Fig. 4.13d, e), great care was taken to show earlobes clearly pierced to hold earspools but, in this case, devoid of ornaments. Contrasting with the empty earlobes is an elaborate headdress that includes a diadem, spherical ornaments, and bands of textured material.



Figure 4.13 Ears and hearing at La Blanca: (a) puffy-faced figurine with detailed ears (SM-90-26-1-F31-4, 5 cm height); (b) figurine with large ear ornament (SM-90-26-4-100-69); (c) profile view of figurine with prominent breath bead and large ear ornament (SM-90-27-3-150-175); (d) front view of figurine with pierced earlobes and elaborate headdress in the Edwin Shook Collection, Universidad del Valle (6 cm height); (e) profile view of figurine in panel (d). Photos (a)–(c) courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project; photos (d) and (e) courtesy of the Department of Archaeology, Universidad del Valle, Guatemala

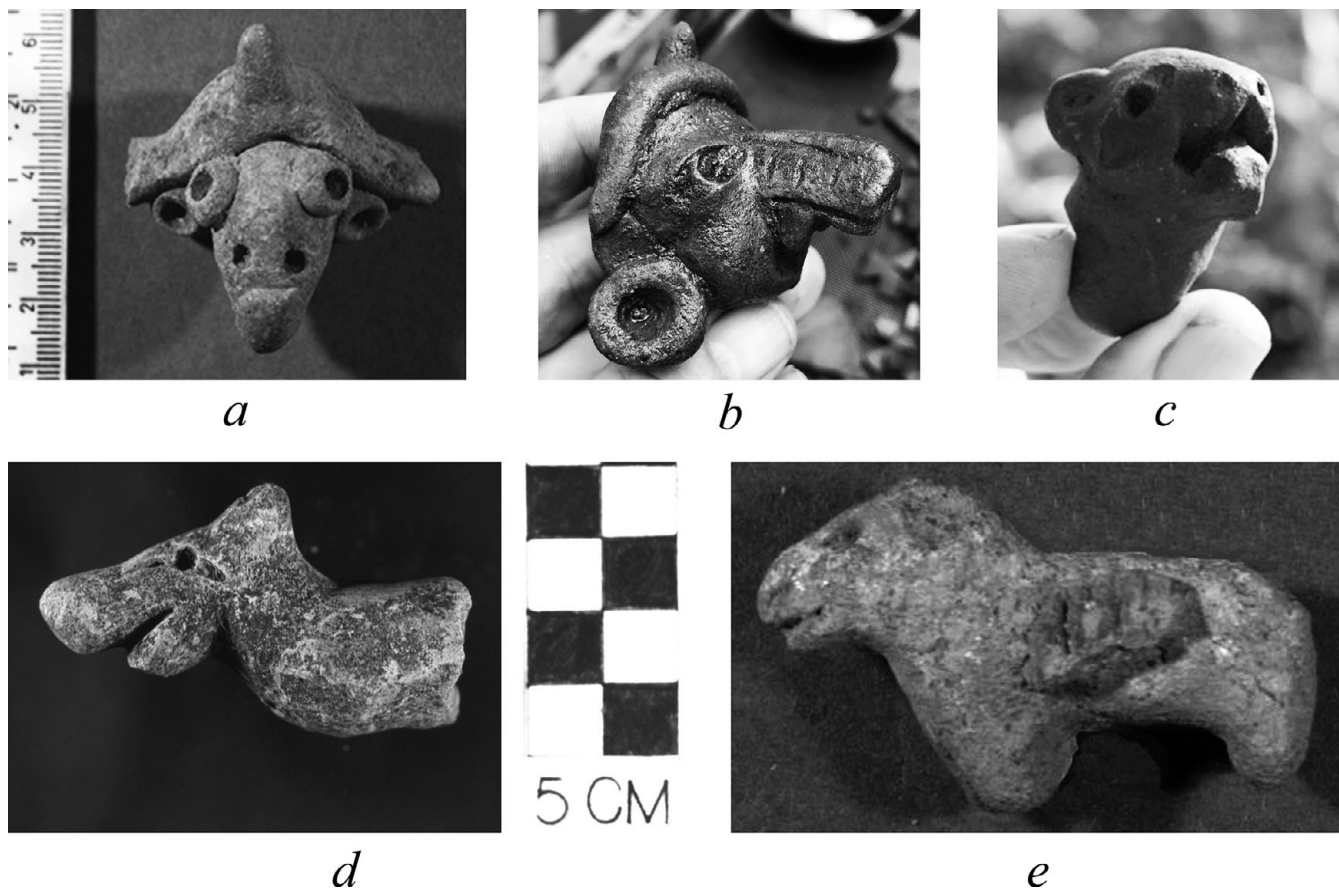


Figure 4.14 Animal figurines at La Blanca: (a) bird (SM-32-6-25-217); (b) tapir; (c) feline; (d) dog (SM-90-27-1-237A-17); (e) winged dog. Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

Although the meaning of pierced but denuded ears at La Blanca is unclear, in later periods “to portray someone’s ear divested of its ornaments or damaged was to show that person’s position in society being threatened and, possibly, permanently diminished” (Afanador-Pujol 2015: 81).

The Human–Animal Relationship

Although this study privileges the human form, it would be remiss to ignore the fact that earspools and other forms of ornamentation, as well as a suite of attributes that denote sensory capabilities, appear with consistency on animal figurines at La Blanca.²⁰ Some of the creatures bear a resemblance to animals found in nature, while others take more imaginative forms that are accompanied by distinctly anthropomorphic features and costuming (Fig. 4.14a) (Arroyo 2002: fig. 132). One very unusual figurine portrays a tapir, but its anthropomorphic attributes, including large earspools and a headdress, are far removed from the realm of the natural world

(Fig. 4.14b). Its snout, however, leaves little doubt that the artisan who crafted the figurine had some knowledge of the flexible proboscises of tapirs. Its wide eyes, open mouth, animated features, and exaggerated earspools appear to suggest that this tapir shared with humans a consciousness as well as sartorial sensibilities.

It is difficult to know what figurines like this signified. Are they supernatural creatures? Natural creatures endowed with extraordinary capacities? Amusing characters designed to entertain or educate? Do they embody “an intersectionality across categories of identity” that encompassed the human, animal, and supernatural worlds (Croucher and Belcher 2017: 450)? They differ considerably from more naturalistically rendered animal figurines (Fig. 4.14c, d), which suggests that their imaginative attributes were deliberate choices, designed to set them apart from the realm of nature alone. Joyce (2003: 259) suggested that animal figurines from Honduras gave form to non-material parts of the self “represented as an animal, that acted while the body was asleep, and could act in arenas where the physical body could not, including the realm of ancestors and sacred beings.” Animal spirit

companions, she argued, were vital parts of ancient Mesoamerican embodied selves. Hepp and Joyce (2013: 283) argued along similar lines, characterizing relatively rare figurines from Oaxaca with both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic attributes as “transformational” or indicative of an interest in beings able to “cross the boundaries between the human and animal realms.” Meskell and Joyce (2003: 89) described similarly hybrid forms among the Classic Maya as evidence of “the disjunction between a contemporary notion of species boundaries and the extension of personhood across apparent natural disjunctions” (also see Brown and Emery 2008; Brown and Walker 2008).²¹

At La Blanca, the zoomorphic figurines garbed in ornaments that mirror those worn by the very humans who held them in their hands allude to meanings that encompassed both the human and the animal. Meskell (2015: 15) wrote that animals are “sentient and mortal and so resemble us, but in their anatomy, habits and physical capacities they differ.” Their fabrication in the form of figurines, she added, mediates the similarities and the differences and makes visible that “they are like us and knowable to us, but at the same time fundamentally strange and other.” The animal figurines at La Blanca likely engaged with similar concerns and were not, in other words, merely expressions of an interest in local fauna or animals integral to subsistence strategies. The primary protein sources at La Blanca were domesticated dogs, deer, and turtles; some iguana and fish were also eaten, as well as a small number of birds (Love 1999c; Wake and Harrington 2002; Mallory Melton, personal communication, 2016). But no figurines found to date at La Blanca portray deer, turtles, iguanas, or fish. Some do portray dogs (Fig. 4.14d), but they often lack realism, as one imaginatively winged one makes clear (Fig. 4.14e). Avian figurines – some of which are whistles – are quite common, yet birds did not contribute significantly to the diet at La Blanca. Coatimundis, which also make a regular appearance in the figurine assemblage, played a similarly nominal dietary role.

The participation of La Blanca animal figurines in a human world – through shared ornamentation and sensorial animation – hints at a meaning beyond the mimetic. Invoking the ideas of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) as well as the Plato’s discussion of mirroring in his *Republic*, Dušan Borić (2007: 91) reminded scholars that mimetic activities sometimes do more than reproduce an external “reality”; they also expose “the true being of what becomes represented,” or a “more profound reality than that encountered in the world of everyday human experience.” To recognize the theoretical potential of animal figurines is to recognize the relational potential

of objects and to highlight their ways of meaning instead of their taxonomic place. F. LeRon Shults (2007: 338) linked these new ways of understanding ancient figurines to shifts within the philosophy of science or what he termed a movement from Aristotle’s emphasis on defining an object’s substance to Kant’s (1965: 113) or Peirce’s (1998) privileging of the ways in which an object relates to other things. Rather than focusing on ascertaining the genus of the animal portrayed by a figurine, more recent studies emphasize an object’s relational potentials to people and within intermeshed systems of representation.

Representational Pottery

At La Blanca, animal figurines, like those of humans, were crafted at a variety of scales and not necessarily as part of a “narrative dialogue” that reflected the scalar relationships found in nature or between humans and animals (Meskell 2015: 10). Pottery, too, engaged with a similar interest in the representational spectrum of animals and humans as well as shifting scales and modes of viewership. At La Blanca, a series of fragmentary vessels reveal carefully modeled anthropomorphic and zoomorphic faces that encircle the circumference, perhaps the heirs to modeled effigy vessels utilized in previous eras in the Mazatán region (Fig. 4.15a–d) (Coe 1961; Lesure 2000: figs. 3–9).²² To be clear, at La Blanca these vessels are far rarer than figurines. To date, fewer than twenty-five examples have been found in both elite and non-elite households and surface collections (Love and Guernsey 2011: 182). But while scarce when compared with figurines, they nevertheless partook in the intervisual world of La Blanca, invoking some of the same imagery and motifs. In one example, the hybrid face – part human, part animal – displays closed, puffy-lidded eyes that compare to those of some figurines, thick parted lips, a nose with prominent nostrils, and a deeply furrowed brow that mirrors those of distinctly feline faces on other vessels (Fig. 4.15a).²³ When complete, the vessel would have had a diameter of approximately 38 cm and a significant holding capacity. An even larger example illustrates the size that some of these figured vessels took: in this case, its diameter would have measured at least 47 cm (Fig. 4.15b).²⁴ Although the majority of the face is missing, one can discern an anthropomorphic ear with a large earpool and part of a cheek, much of which is highlighted with red pigment.

Other effigy vessels focus exclusively on human representations. In one diminutive example whose diameter would have been approximately 7 cm, the sole surviving human face is delicately modeled, with headdress details

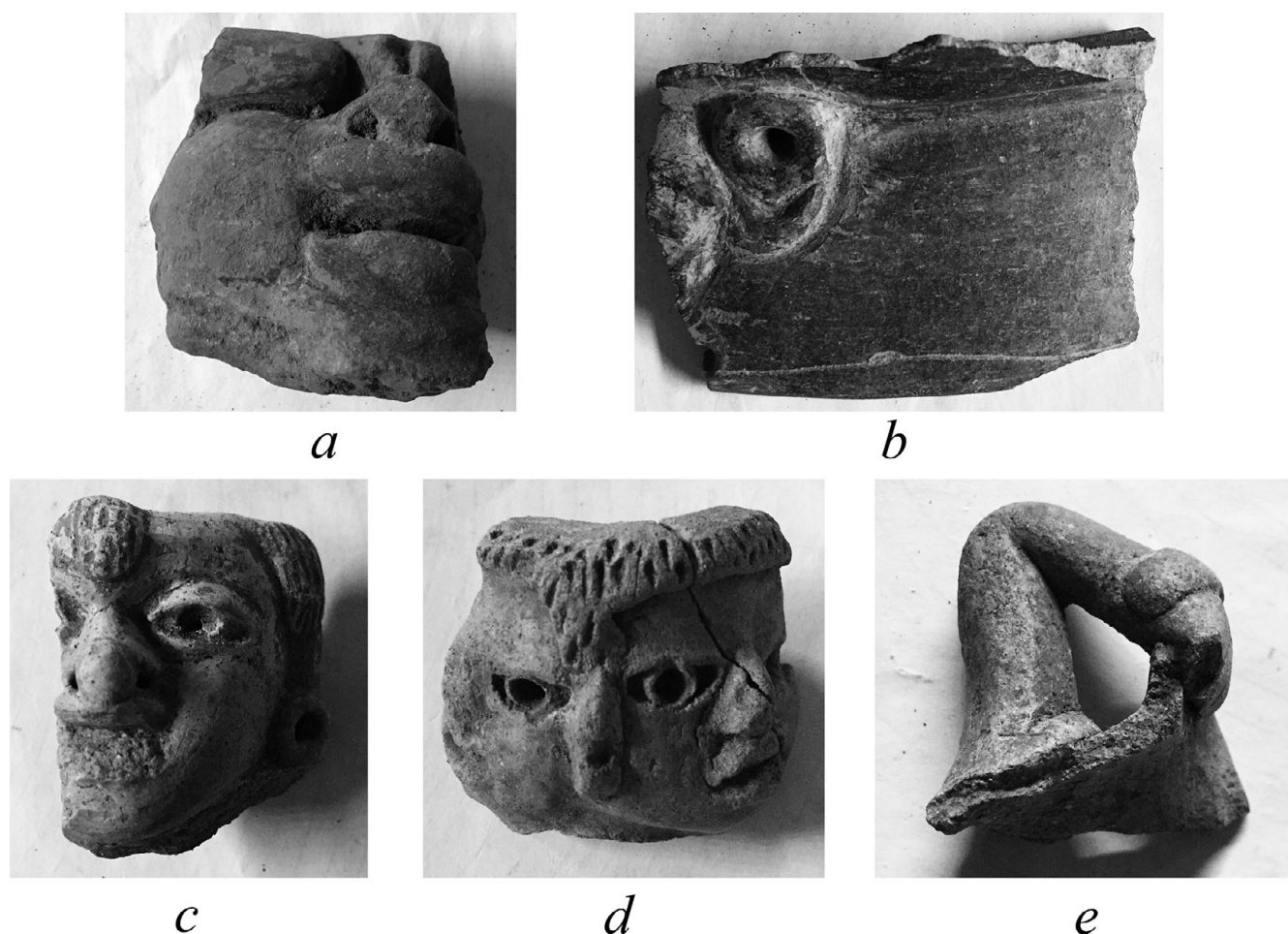


Figure 4.15 Modeled figural vessels at La Blanca. Photos by author, courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

identical to those found on figurines, large earspools, and a nose almost completely obscured by a large spherical breath bead that rests atop a prominent upper lip (Fig. 4.15c).²⁵ The lower lip appears to have been deliberately pecked away in much the same way as the lips of some figurines. In yet another even tinier example whose diameter would have been approximately 2.5 cm, only two of what must have been four faces survive, one merging into the other via a shared ear and hair/head-dress (Fig. 4.15d).²⁶ As with figurines, the eyes are emphasized, as are the parted lips.

These vessels demonstrate that ceramics at La Blanca were, at least at times, enlivened by three-dimensionally rendered anthropomorphic representations as well as zoomorphic representations that shared distinctly human features. Like figurines, they participated in a Preclassic “figured” world that emphasized attributes like breath beads, wide eyes with prominent pupils, and parted lips. While most appear to focus on heads, there is one example at La Blanca where the tiny vessel itself takes the form of a human body (Fig. 4.15e).²⁷ All that remains

is a single human arm, whose hand and bejeweled wrist clasp the rim. Whether there was once a head is difficult to say with any certainty, although it seems unlikely; it is as if the head was forsaken in order to accommodate the mouth of the vessel. In this sense, it recalls the Tab figurines, whose heads are also missing and which likewise engage the viewer in the process of reconstructing what is absent.

These vessels with anthropomorphic imagery also participated in the process of miniaturization, scaling up or down a suite of representational features.²⁸ Artemis Karnava (2015: 147) addressed, for the Bronze Age Aegean, an interest in miniaturization that linked miniature pots to figurines and even script traditions. She viewed the suite of objects and processes as evidence for the creation of a “miniature world, a world where all sense of size, scale or proportion had vanished” (Karnava 2015: 149). Similar overlapping miniature worlds existed at Middle Preclassic La Blanca, and their common denominator was anthropomorphic or animal-human hybrid forms. The miniature figural pots at La Blanca are

particularly interesting: they were crafted from the same local clay as the thousands of full-size, non-figural pots found at the site. Yet through the addition of figural components, they referenced canons of representation more widely attested in figurine traditions. They do something more or different from most ceramic vessels at La Blanca; they sit at the nexus between pots, figurines, and the very people who handled them and shared similar attributes and costuming. This rich intervisuality must have been key to their meanings and “entanglement” in the lives of the people who used them (after Foxhall 2015: 1).

Blurring the Boundaries of Representation

There are also figurines at La Blanca that, while essentially anthropomorphic, appear to represent supernatural beings. They parallel, in many ways, contemporaneous monumental depictions in which, as de la Fuente (1994: 217) observed, the human and divine converge. With figurines, as with sculpture, the human body appears to have served as a bridge between the natural and supernatural realms. What figurines make clear, however, is that musings on the relationship between this world and the otherworld were not only the stuff of kings and courts. They confirm that people from many walks of life were engaged with objects designed to express a capacity for divinity or supernatural prowess.

For example, one figurine reveals unusual, rectangular-shaped eyes that contrast with those of most figurines at La Blanca (Fig. 4.16a). During the Classic period, different eye shapes conveyed different kinds of sight, with the squared eyes of gods being qualitatively different from the almond-shaped eyes of humans (Houston and Taube 2000: 283). The La Blanca figurine’s deliberately modeled rectilinear eye sockets may indicate that these ideas trace their roots deep into the

Preclassic period, where they first communicated a unique form of sight, different from that of most humans.²⁹ Another recurring type of figurine displays an unusual egg-shaped head and simply formed punctate eyes and mouth (Fig. 4.16b). Whether it is meant to convey a supernatural being or something else entirely is not clear. In yet another example, care was taken to convey age through the addition of deeply incised, wrinkly cheeks (Fig. 4.16c). While this figurine may represent an elderly individual, it is equally likely that the aged features communicate an ancestral or even divine status; advanced age was often a characteristic of deities and revered ancestors in later periods.

Costume and Adornment

Costume also played a communicative role with La Blanca figurines, although its significance often eludes us (see Pinzón 2011: 124–131 for discussion). Several of Arroyo’s Type 7 figurines – with the closed eyes and puffy features that I argued are part of a suite of features associated with ancestors in later periods (Guernsey 2012) – wear a headdress that wraps around the head and to which is attached a round or oval bun-shaped “jewel” usually incised with a cross (Fig. 4.17a) (Arroyo 2002: fig. 116; Pinzón 2011: fig. 9.5). Type 7 figurines are found in both elite and commoner households at La Blanca, which suggests that this type of costume wielded significance across the socioeconomic spectrum. Arroyo (2002: 212) noted that, in at least two different cases, these clay “jewels” appear to have been purposely removed or broken off from the figurines at La Blanca. Our more recent excavations add credence to her suggestion. We have found additional examples of Type 7 heads where the jewels have been deliberately pried off as well as instances in which the excised jewels alone were recovered (Fig. 4.17b). While such evidence might be dismissed as

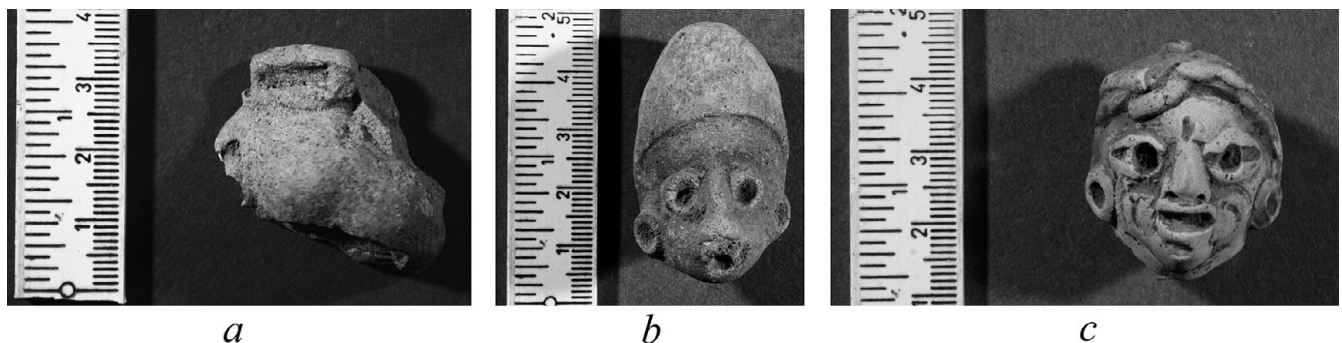


Figure 4.16 Individuation in La Blanca figurines: (a) profile view of figurine with rectangular eye (SM-32-1-17-475); (b) egg-shaped head (SM-32-4-14-155); (c) aged facial features (SM-32-2-2-106). Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

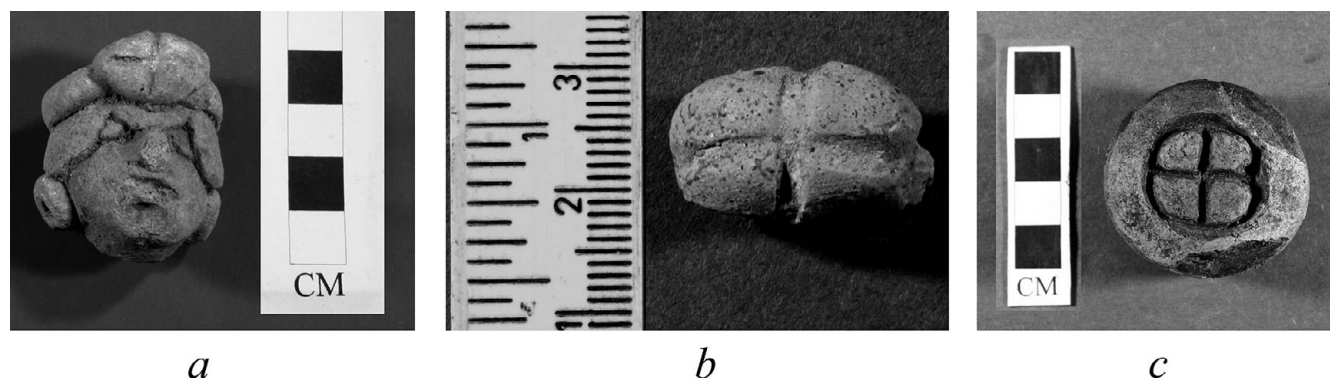


Figure 4.17 “Jewel” adornments at La Blanca: (a) puffy-faced figurine with jewel in headdress (SM-37-3-20A-166); (b) jewel from figurine headdress (SM-32-1-23-247); (c) stamp with “jewel” design (SM-28-7-18-55). Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

accidental breakage, both Arroyo and I, independently, concluded otherwise. The jewels, when intact in the headdresses of figurines, are quite securely attached; they are not particularly susceptible to being inadvertently snapped off through post-depositional disturbance. Moreover, Michael Love and I examined several specimens missing their jewels and found nothing to indicate that the damage was recent or the result of a trowel blow while excavating. Their removal appears to have been an ancient and deliberate act.

Ascertaining what these jewels signified is difficult, although the presence of a ceramic stamp with a similar design carved into one end suggests that the motif carried some significance at La Blanca (Fig. 4.17c). The four-lobed design may reference flowers. But it also compares to bead-like objects incised with similar cruciform designs identified as “weights” from the Gulf Coast region that, albeit larger – from 3.4 to 6 cm in diameter – were fashioned for suspension and used, perhaps, for fishing or weaving (Drucker 1952: 142, plate 42, left, h–k). Although I hesitate to suggest that the ornaments at La Blanca, fashioned in miniature on figurines, reference objects documented on the Gulf Coast, their formal similarities are intriguing. So too is the fact that if one “scaled up” the ornaments at La Blanca to human size, their dimensions would approximate those illustrated by Drucker. Perhaps the ornaments at La Blanca referenced objects, like the weights, which had specific uses in a range of domestic, craft, and subsistence activities. Such conjecture is only that, however: objects comparable to those documented by Drucker on the Gulf Coast have not been found archaeologically at La Blanca to date.

At La Blanca, items like earspools, necklaces, articles of clothing, and headdresses were carefully rendered on figurines of all types (see Pinzón 2011: 98–110 for discussion). Some wear skirts of varying lengths (Fig. 4.18a, e, f) or loincloth-like garments (Fig. 4.18b). Others are attired in necklaces or pectorals (Fig. 4.18d, e, f),

sometimes anchored by epaulettes (Fig. 4.2c), or wear thick, occasionally textured, cuffs (Figs. 4.2c, 4.18c). The adornment of figurines reflected – or, just as likely, contrasted with – costume elements worn by the individuals holding the objects, thereby invoking discussions of social identity and its significance.

One also sees costume elements at La Blanca that parallel those worn by figures in contemporaneous and later stone sculpture traditions. For example, several figurines wear a type of headdress that incorporates a band across the forehead as well as one that encircles the face and chin of the figure (Fig. 4.19a). Similar headdresses appear on El Baúl (Cotzumalguapa) Stela 1 (Fig. 6.6), as well as on a monument from Tonalá, Chiapas, and on figurines from Central Mexico during the Early Classic period (see Guernsey 2012: figs. 4.45b, 4.46; Taube and Zender 2009: fig. 7.5). The headdress at La Blanca also compares to those worn by the two male figures at Loma del Zapote (Fig. 2.6), although, at La Blanca, a diminutive feline head marks the crown of the figure’s head (Fig. 4.19b). Perhaps this headdress motif, as on contemporaneous monumental sculpture, communicated some aspect of the figure’s identity.

Recurring Figurine Types and Questions of Replication

Before moving on to a more general discussion of the data and ideas raised in this chapter, I wish to comment briefly on a specific type of figurine that recurs with some frequency at La Blanca (Fig. 4.20a). We have found more than sixty to date in households of all rank, distributed in comparable percentages. We dubbed this specific type “Shriners” because of their fez-like headdresses, which are quite consistent in spite of occasional variation: some include decorative fillets in various positions, some are textured, and others eschew ornamentation entirely.

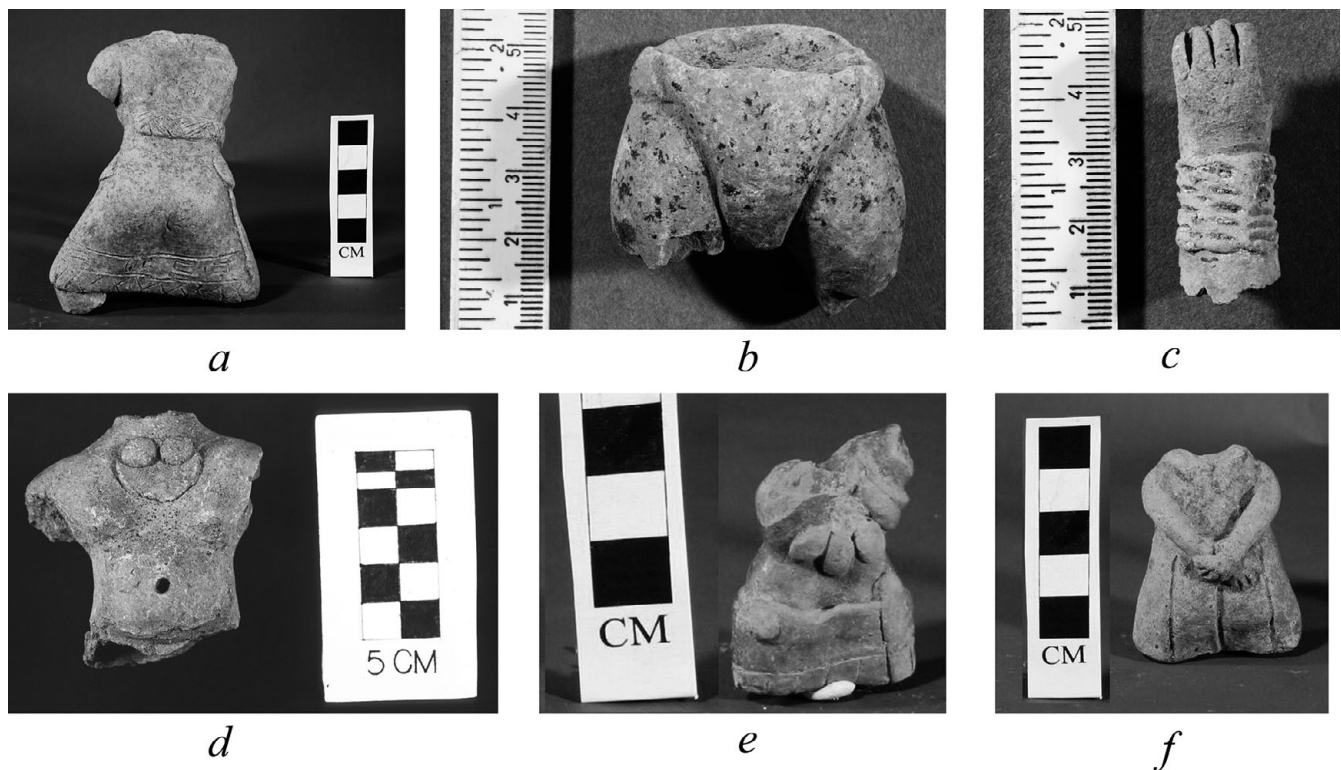


Figure 4.18 Costume and adornment on La Blanca figurines: (a) decorated skirt and woven belt (SM-38-4-R187-261); (b) loincloth (SM-32-2-10-119); (c) wrist cuff (SM-32-1-9-121); (d) necklace/pectoral (SM-90-27-3-140-118); (e) pleated skirt and globular necklace (SM-28-5-18-144); (f) skirt with vertical striations (SM-33-2-1-854). Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project



Figure 4.19 Figurine with headdress and chin strap from La Blanca, Edwin Shook collection, Universidad del Valle (7 cm height): (a) front view; (b) detail of feline ornament on top of headdress. Photos courtesy of the Department of Archaeology, Universidad del Valle, Guatemala

Most striking are the monotonous facial expressions and features of Shriner figurines. Eye shapes, nostrils, and slightly parted lips are identical as are the distinctive oval faces. This homogeneity remains a constant even when the size of the heads varies considerably. The smallest examples are 3 cm in height, while the largest are 8 cm.

Different production techniques – small heads are solid and larger ones hollow– do not correlate with relative household rank, and the archaeological evidence indicates that all domiciles procured both small solid and larger hollow versions of Shriner figurines.

The implications of this evidence are worth pondering. The distribution of Shriner figurines indicates that people from all walks of life at La Blanca sought out and utilized this type of figurine. Whatever identity Shriner figurines embodied was, apparently, pertinent to many residents at La Blanca. This identity was expressed through a consistent suite of ornamentation including headdresses and earpools as well as the use of red paint to mark, in a number of cases, features of the face or portions of the headdress. It also included recurring facial features and expressions that, regardless of size, remained strikingly consistent.

Christina Halperin (2009: 389; also see Hendon 2003) addressed the repeated appearance of figurines portraying elaborately garbed individuals in elite and commoner households at Motul de San José and at its satellite centers during the Classic period. She interpreted it as a concern with the construction and maintenance of social identities between households of varying rank.

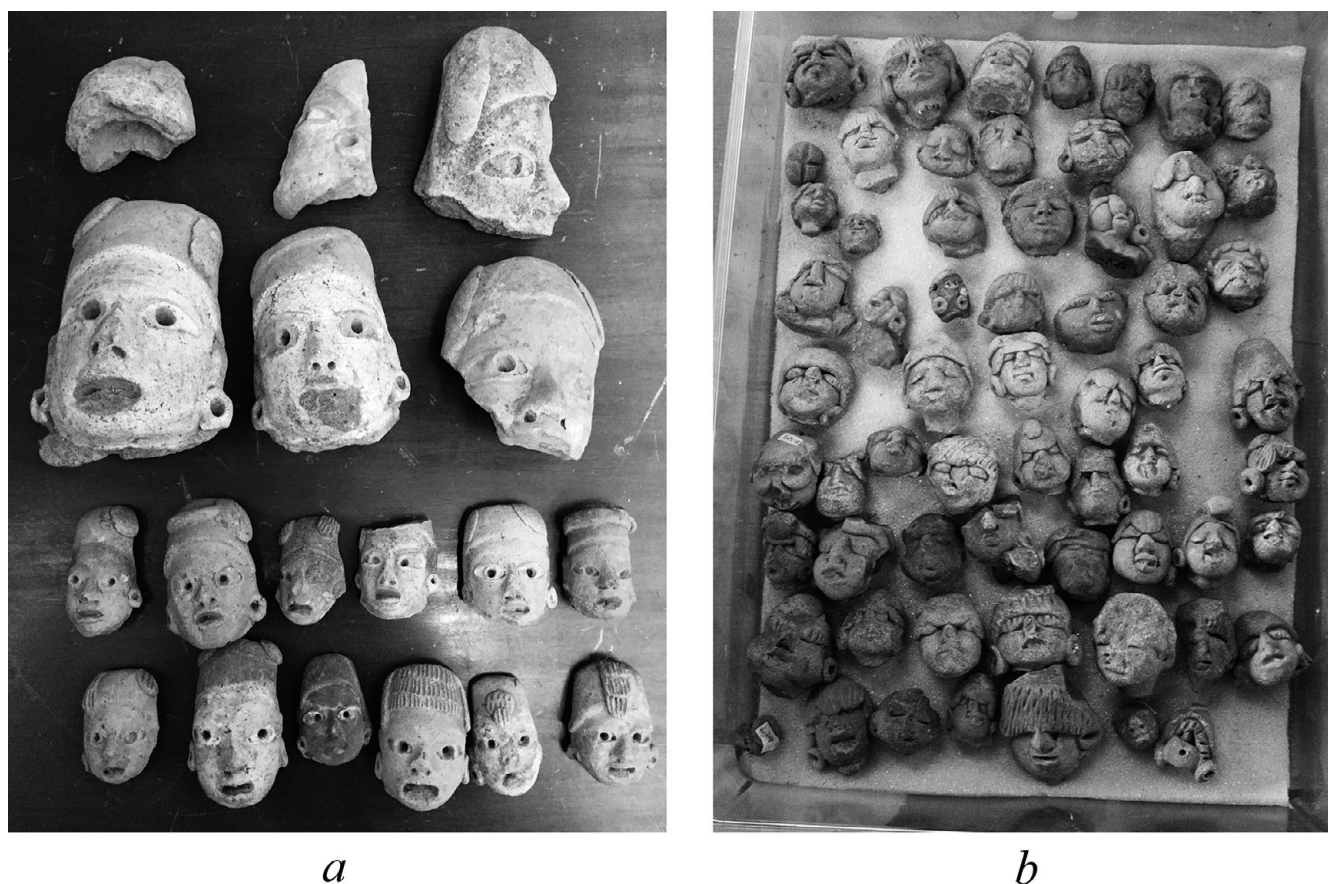


Figure 4.20 Figurine types at La Blanca: (a) “Shriner” types; (b) puffy-faced types, Edwin Shook collection, Universidad del Valle. Photo (a) courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project; photo (b) by Robert Rosenswig, courtesy of the Department of Archaeology, Universidad del Valle, Guatemala

Shriner figurines at La Blanca may indicate a similar attention to a social identity that was shared by people regardless of socioeconomic status.

Recurring figurine types have been documented elsewhere in Preclassic Mesoamerica (Arnold and Follensbee 2015; R. Joyce 2003). Lesure (2012: 378) noted repetitive figurine types in Central Mexico, some of which were shared between communities 100 and even 200 km distant and others of which demonstrated more restricted distributions.³⁰ Brown (2003: 105) suggested that a figurine from Blackman Eddy, Belize, so closely resembled one from nearby Cahal Pech that they appeared to have been crafted by the same artist.

A box of La Blanca figurines collected by Edwin Shook in the 1970s illustrates the homogeneous nature of Type 7 figurines, which all bear the same puffy features, jowly cheeks, and closed, heavy-lidded eyes (Fig. 4.20b) (Arroyo 2002: 210–213, fig. 7; Guernsey 2010, 2012; Guernsey and Love 2008). The Shook collection contains seventy examples of this figurine type (Ivic de Monterroso 2004: 420) and forty-eight more have been excavated recently.³¹ Figurines displaying remarkably similar puffy

features appear at other sites, suggesting that certain categories of identity were shared beyond the confines of a single urban center. For example, figurines with the same bloated features and closed eyes have been documented at La Victoria, Cuauhtémoc, El Varal, Naranjo, La Venta, Kaminaljuyu, and Chalchuapa (Guernsey 2012: 105–109).³²

It is important to clarify that recurring Preclassic figurines are never identical. While they readily cohere into an identifiable type, they also reveal variations of hairstyle, headdress, and ornamentation.³³ They certainly do not demonstrate, in other words, the sort of close replication achievable through the use of molds, a technique for making figurines that emerged by the Early Classic period. For mold-made figurines, clay was pressed into clay molds to form the fronts; backs were typically hand-modeled (Sears 2017: 222). But even later mold-made figurines produced in multiples demonstrate subtle differences. At Cerro Palenque, Honduras, molds enabled artists to craft multiple representations with identical fronts, while the backs were completed by hand, probably by a varied group of people who lacked the specialized

training that molds require (Lopiparo 2006: 160). At Aguateca, mold-made figurines likewise reveal supplementary hand-modeled elements (Triadan 2007). Even with the advent of molds during the Classic period, in other words, artisans continued to view the surfaces of figurines as amenable to elaboration, but not always for the same reasons and in spite of the fact that those additions were at odds with efficiency. Much attention has been paid in Mesoamerican scholarship to molds and their implications for the production of multiple figurines, which is warranted. Yet, even with Preclassic hand-modeled figurines, we see a similar interest in repeating types that, nonetheless, reveal some variation (Guernsey and Love 2019).

Other figurines from La Blanca likewise cohere into identifiable types. Yet each individual example reveals subtle differences, like variations on a theme. Pinzón's (2011) Type 4 "Peinados y Rapados" figurines share similar expressions, facial features, and lobed hairstyles (Fig. 4.21). This same type also appears at La Victoria (Coe 1961: figs. 54a, 55f, and 55s) and La Venta (Drucker 1952: plate 41, left, k, I-B-3b). Tab figurines, too, illustrate a similar emphasis on repetitive, but not identical, types of characters (Figs. 4.3 and 4.4).

Love and I (Guernsey and Love n.d.) suggested that the replication of similar figurines – similar, yet not exact – mapped out categories of social identity both within La Blanca and beyond, in communities where similar figurines appear (see Grove and Gillespie 1984). Surely a certain amount of homogeneity might be expected in figurine assemblages engaged with representing sets of norms against which people defined and positioned themselves (Bailey 2005: 199). Replication would, in such cases, be attributed to shared conceptions of "what a person . . . should look like," shared discourses of identity construction, and shared perceptions of corporeality (Fisher and Loren 2003: 227). Repetitive figurines also, by extension, infer repetitive practices, carried out by multiple members of the community. Repetition, especially with hand-modeled figurines, should be recognized as intentional and, thereby, key to their meaning. In this sense, Middle Preclassic figurines presage later mold-made figurines: both exhibit a tension between repetition and variation, the melody and the harmony, the rhythm and the syncopation.

I would suggest that compelling analogies can be drawn between the "sameness" of recurring figurine types and notions of personhood that are subsumed under the Maya term *winik*, which encompasses ideas of personhood, vigesimal systems, calendrical time, and social order. John Monaghan (1998: 137) reasoned that *winik* also connotes the concept of destiny or "one's

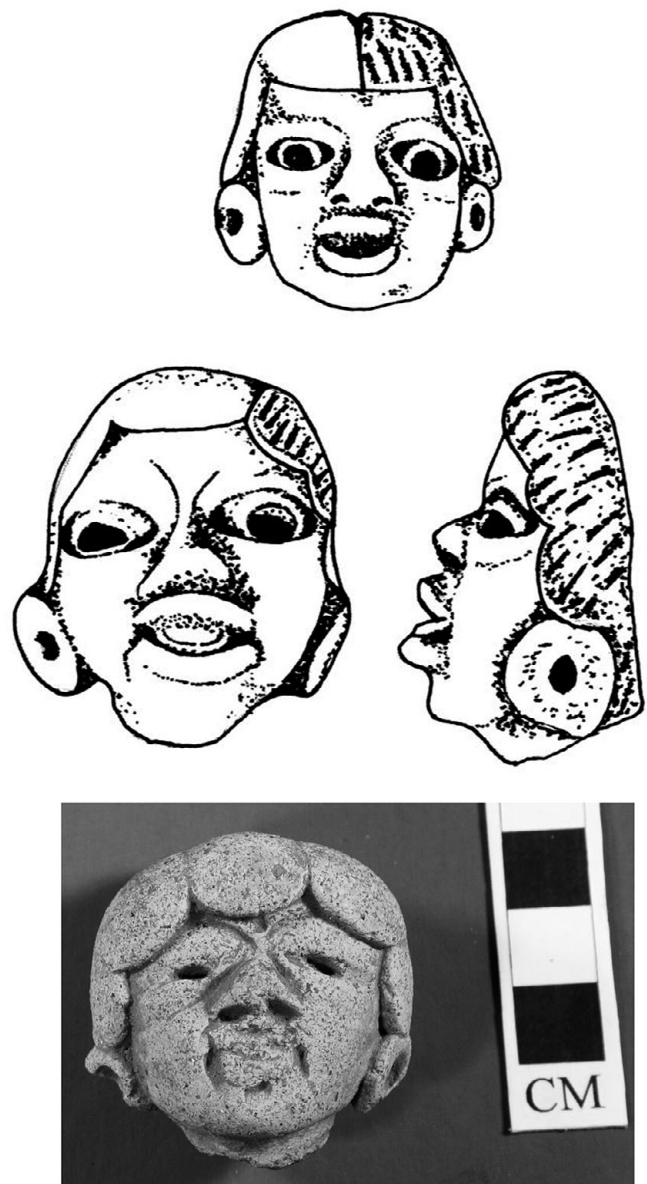


Figure 4.21 Examples of La Blanca Type 4 "Peinados y Rapados" figurines. After Pinzón (2011: fig. 5.9). Drawings and photo courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

general fortune in life but also things like one's profession and character," which was determined based on the day on which one was born. Similar ideas are found among the Postclassic peoples of Central Mexico. According to Jill Furst (1995: 77), one's day of birth in the 260-day calendar "served as a name or designation," and "everyone born on one date had the same calendrical name, and the same or a similar intrinsic nature and a comparable fate." For some Mesoamerican groups – and this is especially pertinent to my arguments – destiny also decreed one's physical characteristics, which were shared by people born on the same day.³⁴ Yet, as Monaghan (1998: 139) cautioned, the system allowed for variation

within this scheme: “[T]he Mesoamerican theory of destiny, with its twenty basic types and thirteen permutations on each type, recognizes more complexity than the typological theories generated by modern psychologists.” Even more interesting is the fact that, in Kaqchikel, the word for “destiny,” *vach*, also means “face.”

Given this evidence, it seems reasonable to suggest that certain Preclassic figurines – recurring types that nevertheless reveal subtle variation – provide the earliest evidence for similar notions of “destiny” articulated through the face. Faces, according to Mesoamerican understandings, were imbued with concepts of destiny, the permutations of time, character, and profession, but were also grounded in the idea of fundamental types or patterns of repetition that simultaneously accommodate permutations. Personhood was believed to be bestowed at birth but not inevitably fixed (Monaghan 1998: 139). Moreover, this personhood was not necessarily “the property of the individual human being but is a status that inheres in a collectivity” (Monaghan 1998: 140). Perhaps figurines that cohere into recurring types served to situate individuals within a larger collective vision, anchored in a belief system that encompassed time, ritual, and social order. Their ultimate fragmentation, I argue in [Chapter 5](#), was predicated on a similar understanding of personhood, which could be distributed, and which inherently embodied tensions between the individual and society, the part and the whole.

Monica Smith (2015: 24) argued that repeating aesthetics forge an “authenticity of duplication.” With Middle Preclassic figurines, the social identities embodied by figurines were strategically authenticated and reinforced through processes of duplication. Recurring types rendered idealized human subjects and modes of social decorum, and these processes of duplication likely extended to the production of members of society and certain essential and standardized roles as well. Yet one should not lose sight of the variation. Only when Middle Preclassic figurines are situated at the intersection of these tensions – between repetition and variation, between the individual and the collective – does their full significance emerge.

I am not suggesting that all Preclassic figurines fit this pattern of recurring types and necessarily carried these specific meanings. That would be folly, as figurines do not represent a “coherent, bounded body of phenomena” (R. Joyce 2002: 603). Their variability likely also reflects the fact that few people can be reduced to a single identity; identity is always contextual, relational, and labile. People at La Blanca and elsewhere likely needed to express many different identities over the course of their lifetimes. It should also be remembered that peoples’

bodies change throughout the years, and expressions of difference may speak as much about gradual, physical transformations as they do about social ones (Borić 2007: 90). Marcus (2018) offered another particularly appealing explanation for the tension between repetition and variation in figurines. She suggested that even generic figurines may have “become individuals” during ritual performances that included an “individualizing process” of naming, dressing, or animation of some sort.

The many unique or unusual figurines typical of any archaeological project’s data set are a constant reminder of the futility in suggesting any simple, one-size-fits-all interpretation for Preclassic figurines. Nevertheless, my suggestion that recurring types of Preclassic figurines provide tantalizingly early evidence for notions of “destiny” articulated through the face represents a productive – and innovative – possibility that takes into account the very fact that certain types do recur in considerable numbers and that they demonstrate a sustained focus on the head. My suggestion also situates the objects in well-documented and enduring Mesoamerican understandings of personhood.³⁵ This model likewise accommodates variation and, more than that, recognizes it as fundamental to the expression of identities that were never static and always relational. As I develop further in the [next chapter](#), this interpretation also dovetails nicely with archaeological evidence that indicates Preclassic figurines, even when – or perhaps especially when – broken, were an effective mechanism for materializing relationships between individuals and larger social collectives. Regardless of which interpretation any individual scholar puts forth, we can all agree that Preclassic figurines attest to the many conceptual issues with which human figuration was involved, and the great many people who had a stake in their expression.

Discussion

All evidence suggests that figurines in Preclassic Mesoamerica played a vital social role. But the nature of this social role is less forthcoming in spite of an array of data and a truly extraordinary corpus of representations. Some figurines probably proscribed social roles and established codes of decorum. Others, like the Tab figurines, may have inspired discussion, debate, and even laughter. Regardless of specifics that may forever elude us, mimesis was likely central to their meaning. Halperin (2014: 41–42), heeding Aristotle’s assertion that “the emotive experience of mimesis is a form of learning,” suggested that it was through “the simultaneous merging of likeness and difference in mimesis” that Mesoamerican figurines

promoted “new ways of perceiving the world.” Halperin also invoked the work of Walter Benjamin and urged consideration of the relationship between mimesis and power:

Mimesis is implicated in power relations because the making of representations is a way to order and define the world. Mimetic representations assert a particular way of thinking, feeling, and enacting. In some cases . . . mimetic forms can help unlock what Benjamin (1969 [1936]) calls the “optical unconscious,” allowing people to see the structures that shape their lives. At the same time, power may be enacted through a politics of representation in which some representations are controlled and privileged above others, giving conceptual weight to particular social groups and their associated practices. Importantly, however, mimesis also resists containment, providing space for appropriation, reinterpretation, and revision. This flexibility underscores some of the nuances in which social groups may play off one another in forging a place in the world. While archaeological discussions tend to focus on power as inherent to leaders and dominant social classes, mimetic power plays are enacted by both the dominant and the subaltern.

We can discern both the mimetic power of Preclassic figurines as well as their flexibility and permutations through time. But questions of who crafted them, where they were made, how they functioned, or how they were distributed continue to elude scholars. Clark and Colman (2014) asserted that ceramic figurines were “images made by the population at large” at Early Preclassic San Lorenzo. Yet they also asserted that the lack of ear ornamentation on figurines might reflect sumptuary rules, imposed by elites, which governed aspects of personal presentation. Evidence at Middle Preclassic Chalcatzingo indicates that, at least at times and in some places, figurine production may have been an elite prerogative: the household containing more than 1,400 figurine fragments and evidence of drill cores appears to have been a specialized workshop controlled by elites (Cyphers 1993). At La Blanca, the fact that elite households have greater densities of figurines is provocative, but as of yet we have no data to indicate the mechanisms that would have facilitated this disparity. In truth, there is not yet, to date, much that can be said about mechanisms of production, distribution, or access for Preclassic figurines and how they differed between sites and regions through time. Nor do we understand why some polities utilized figurines in abundance while contemporaneous ones chose not to, as was the case in Early Preclassic Oaxaca (Blomster 2009: 126). Even if we concede that not all communities used figurines, or that the histories of use in

any one place waxed and waned through time, we can nevertheless conclude that figurines were far more pervasive than stone sculpture in Early and Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica. In comparison to stone monuments, figurines were widely available. That does not mean that all figurines were created equal, or were equally accessible, or that they were liberated from spheres of social significance and power differentials. Two things, however, are clear: their relative abundance attests to their social utility and their variety speaks to their endless adaptability.

Recent data concerning mold-made figurine distributions in the Maya Lowlands tell us much about the roles of figurines in Late Classic social exchange. Halperin (2014: 179) used figurine mold distribution and instrumental neutron activation analysis (INAA) of paste in the Motul de San José, Guatemala, region to identify what she referred to as a “mass media model of distribution” in which “figurines with the same paste recipes were widely distributed across household and settlement contexts of different statuses.” The circulation of figurines did not echo the same political and economic boundaries of finely painted pottery or monuments inscribed with hieroglyphic texts, however, which suggested to Halperin that they moved through significantly different spheres of exchange. Perhaps, she argued, Late Classic mold-made figurines were traded in markets or during ceremonies as tokens of the social experiences that transpired in such venues. Halperin cautioned, however, that a single, static production or distribution model for figurines does not fit all regions, even if limited to consideration of only mold-made examples. For instance, her evidence from the Motul de San José region contrasts with data from decentralized polities in the more southeasterly Maya area of Honduras.

We should assume that similar variations in production and distribution existed with regard to hand-modeled Preclassic figurines, especially given their associations with communities of diverse scale and political structures. While it is unclear if the same social mechanisms for the exchange of figurines postulated by Halperin for the Classic period were in place during the Preclassic, we should still recognize Halperin’s data set as critical for confirming the role of figurines in negotiating social relationships in ancient Mesoamerica. Lamentably, a comparable data set for Preclassic, hand-modeled figurines along the south coast does not yet exist, although we have recently initiated an INAA of paste for the figurines at La Blanca. Those results, when available, will inform questions of distribution networks and exchange.

In spite of the many unknowns that doggedly persist in the study of Preclassic figurines, one point is certain: their inherent power was inversely proportional to their

small size. Bailey argued that the social workings of Neolithic figurines were “subtler” than those of public ceremonies held in conjunction with large-scale construction events and rituals. So, too, at Middle Preclassic La Blanca, architecture – especially massive Mound 1 – was “louder” in the ways that it guided movements and structured daily paths (Love 1999a). Yet the social workings of figurines may have been more influential by virtue of the fact that they inspired self-reflection. They were the “quieter rhythm of an unspoken corporeal reality” (Bailey 2007: 118). Figurines, omnipresent at a site like La Blanca, surely stimulated processes of self-reflection, memory, and social engagement. They were abundant, versatile in their adaptability, mobile, and they were in reach.

Equally important is the fact that, even though exponentially smaller than their monumental stone counterparts, figurines shared with stone sculpture a fundamental interest in the human form and its corporeality. Those intervisual connections, in spite of contextual, material, and scalar disparities, should not be minimized. Figurines were, I believe, crucial vehicles through which discussion and debate of the theoretical significance of representation transpired. The flexibility of clay may, too, have enabled exploration of concepts less easily addressed through stone. As I remarked above, hollow figurines, as opposed to solid ones, cannot be explained away as a purely technical solution for achieving greater size. Hollowness may have been desirable for other practical reasons, including its ability to lessen the weight of

objects, which facilitated their transportation (but also increased their fragility). Other more conceptual reasons for preferring hollowness exist, not the least of which is its ability to give physical form to concepts of interiority. Perhaps hollow figurines better conveyed the nature of humans as sentient beings with an interior life. We see, in both Preclassic ceramic figurine traditions and stone sculpture, an interest in denoting – through breath beads or references to the capacity for vocalization – an interior space, within bodies, from which sounds and exhalations emerged. But with ceramic figurines, unlike stone sculpture, this interiority could be made manifest. Hollowness may have been both a technological solution *and* a way of articulating the interiority of human beings, in other words, which was as central to their identity as their bodies and external physicality (see López Austin 1988). But such interiority was not a purely human trait in Preclassic Mesoamerica, as the many hollow animal figurines, which also sometimes functioned as whistles, remind us.³⁶ The acoustical capacity of hollowness is important to remember, as it speaks to an understanding of the generative potential of resonating interior spaces.

Like sculpture, figurines were meditations on the very nature of being human. But they were far more readily accessible meditations. They were “expedient, consistent, mundane, and deeply ingrained in everyday practice” to borrow Meskell’s (2007: 140) words, and representative of the “philosophies in the politics of being” to use Bailey’s felicitous phrasing. And therein lay their power.

Figurines, Fragmentation, and Social Ties

Having outlined the extraordinary extent of small-scale figuration in the form of ceramic figurines in Early and Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica, this chapter turns to a more theoretical exploration of the potential social significance of these objects. It does so by focusing on one recurring aspect of their final state in the archaeological record: their fragmentation. Rarely are they encountered unbroken, and many scholars have commented on – or, more accurately, despaired of – their incomplete nature. Two ideas guide this chapter: (1) that figurines materialized and modeled social relationships and (2) that fragmentation was central to their use and meaning. My fundamental premise is that the processes of fragmentation visible in the archaeological record were part of a complex social matrix concerned with expressions of personhood and its inherent divisibility in Preclassic Mesoamerican society. Fragmented objects reveal as much about the social significance of human representation as do pristine ones; they were part and parcel of the “habitual presentation of the human body” in Preclassic Mesoamerica (after Bailey 2005: 199–200).

In order to situate Preclassic practices of figurine fragmentation within a larger conceptual framework, I draw on a range of evidence including the archaeological record, representations of fragmented body parts in Mesoamerican art, the ethnohistorical and ethnographic literature, and case studies from other parts of the world. The chapter musters an array of data, but also departs into more speculative arenas at times. Bailey (2005: 12) criticized approaches to understanding figurines that are simplistic or offer “anecdote in the place of explanation,” thereby eliminating the possibility of tracing the ways in which arguments are constructed. This chapter seeks to avoid those traps by clearly laying out data, arguments, and new interpretations transparently and in equal measure. It hinges on the premise that the “total recovery of

figurines from a site” or the “millimetre-specific recording of the location of all finds” – while valuable, certainly – may be less helpful in understanding how figurines functioned in the ancient past than posing a new set of questions (Bailey 2005: 24).

Preclassic figurines were the “essence of the communal,” littered throughout many sites in extraordinary abundance and “saturat[ing] communities with specific images/senses of being human” (Bailey 2007: 118). They played a role in crafting and maintaining social identity, both of individuals and of those individuals in relation to the larger community. Mesoamerican understandings of personhood appear to revolve around similar concerns with an individual’s relationship to the larger community, often phrased in bodily terms. These understandings, in my opinion, provide the conceptual matrix in which fragmentation took place. Following Gillespie (1991: 371), I view the fragmentation of figurines not as an act of desecration, but one in which a representation of the human body was separated into its constituent parts. Fragmentation did not merely mark the end of a figurine’s life but was a key part of the process through which social identities and relationships were constructed and maintained. Acts of fragmentation extended well beyond figurines, however, and were part of an enduring aesthetic trope in Mesoamerica, a rhetorical strategy that speaks to the deep structures of historical imagination.¹

Body Parts, Relationships, and Meanings

Joyce (1998) demonstrated that an emphasis on bodily division is a defining characteristic of much of Mesoamerican culture, and there is indeed ample iconographic, archaeological, and ethnographic evidence of individual components of the human body receiving special attention and carrying meanings related to personal identity. Linguistic evidence for concepts of bodily division also exists. Erik Velásquez García (2015: 177–178) noted that Mayan languages differentiate between “alienable” body parts that have a discrete shape and form – such as feet, noses, or chests – and other bodily substances like bone or blood.² Visual evidence underscores the antiquity of these ideas. As I noted in Chapter 2, Kelley (1982) recognized that heads, like those at Early Preclassic San Lorenzo (Fig. 2.2a), were the bodily location most often associated with nominal devices throughout the history of Mesoamerica. The role of faces and heads in carrying “all-important linguistic badges of identity,” Zender (2014: 64) opined, should not be surprising given that

analogous emphases can be found in numerous civilizations, from ancient Egypt to Etruscan Italy to the Great Plains of North America.³

James Fitzsimmons (2009: 166–169; also see Mock 1998) commented on the significance of skulls and other skeletal elements, which served “as discrete portions of the ‘self’” and communicated the identities of both ancestors and victims captured in battle.⁴ Classic Maya hieroglyphic writing systems make especially clear that a person was the sum of their individual parts (Houston et al. 2006: 13). Glyphs for body parts, including heads, toes, torsos, and hands, often include “circles of severance” that mark the point where that body part articulated with the rest of the body (Fig. 5.1a). Buildings, Houston et al. (2006: 13–14) added, also carry these “circles of severance,” which indicates that the conceptual principle of divisibility extended beyond the human body to the social world of the built environment. A similar emphasis on points of articulation is documented ethnographically. Landa (Tozzer 1941: 159) described an initiation ceremony in the month of Mol in which youths, male and female, underwent a series of rituals, one of which included the striking of the “joints of the backs of the hands” nine times. Similar beliefs are found among Nahua speakers. Furst (1995: 69) and López Austin (1988: 166, 215) called attention to the belief that the *tonalli* or soul was concentrated in the joints of the body; joints were also vulnerable to attack by malevolent forces. More recently, Elizabeth Baquedano (2011: 222–224) noted that the modern Nahua of Hueyapan, Morelos, pay particular attention to the wrists of ill persons. The antecedents to these ideas may be quite ancient. As noted in the previous chapter, Pinzón (2011: 134) observed that red pigment on the bodies of Middle Preclassic La Blanca figurines often appears on joints or points of articulation.

Numerous societies around the globe use the interrelationship of body parts to understand the world and explain diverse phenomena from political systems to

genealogies, cosmologies, kinship, social relations, inanimate objects, structures, and the physical layout of villages (Talalay 1993: 50). In Mesoamerica, the familiar vigesimal counting system, based on the twenty digits of a body’s appendages, provides a ready example of a mathematical system derived from humans’ physical form. Isolated body parts also carry computational associations in Classic Maya writing, as in the case of the *nab* sign, which represents a human hand and designates a unit of measurement (Fig. 5.1b) (Eberl and Bricker 2004). Similar conventions persevered in sixteenth-century Central Mexico, as on a map measuring the property of Lázaro Pantecatl and Ana Tepi in which a series of disembodied hands serve as standard units of measure (the *maitl*, or “hand”) (Mundy 2015: 138–139, fig. 7.4).⁵ Ethnohistorical documents, like the Maya Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel (Roys 1967), indicate that associations between the vigesimal system, the calendar, and the human body persisted well into the colonial period. H. E. M. Braakhuis (1987: 45) noted that, in the “Creation of the *Uinal*,” the invention of the day count set into motion the spatial creation of the whole world, humankind included. To this day, the K’iche’ Maya word for human being, *winik* (or *winaq*), also means “20” and “is used for a person because people have ten fingers and ten toes” (Monaghan 1998: 140). As noted in Chapter 4, Monaghan stressed the fact that *winik* references the sacred almanac of twenty days that “counts through all possible social identities,” thus creating a web of meaning that encompassed individual beings, time, and social order.

People, the Earth, Embodiment, and Dismemberment

Insight into the complex relationship between people, their bodies, and the larger physical and social world comes from a number of textual sources dating to the Postclassic and colonial periods. The K’iche’ Maya word *winaqirik*, derived from the root word *winik* (*winaq*) “person,” appears a number of times in the text of the Popol Vuh. Of particular significance is its use in a passage describing the creation of the earth. Nathan Henne (2012: 115–119) noted that in various translations of the Popol Vuh by different authors, *winaqirik* is interpreted in multiple ways, although most associate the word with “create” in some way, as in “the earth was created.” Dennis Tedlock (1996: 223), however, chose to avoid the word “create” in favor of the intransitive verb “arose,” which lends agency to the earth rather than the deities who were in attendance for the moment of creation. His

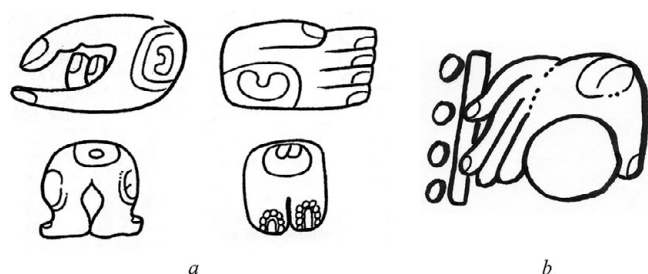


Figure 5.1 Body parts in hieroglyphs: (a) circles of severance on hands, legs, and chests; (b) human hand as hieroglyphic sign *nab*, a unit of measurement. Drawing (a) courtesy of David Stuart; drawing (b) by author after photo by Justin Kerr (K5206)

choice was deliberate and intended to preclude any “implied ontological priority of the spiritual over the material.” By the same token, Henne (2012: 119) argued that translating *winaqirik* as “to people,” as in “to populate with people,” would also be inaccurate: the passage does not refer to the origins of the human race or carry the same meaning as the English phrase “the peopling of the earth.” The passage, in fact, suggests that the creation of the earth took place long before the arrival of humans. Why then, Henne (2012: 122) queried, did the authors of the Popol Vuh express the materialization of the earth in fundamentally human terms?

Henne (2012: 123–124; also see Aldana 2011) noted that, although the Popol Vuh does not specify the material from which the world was formed, northern Mesoamerican – and specifically Nahua – texts do identify the material. In the *Histoire du Mexique* (Jonghe 1905), compiled in the sixteenth century, the Aztec creator deities Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl, in the form of their *naguales* (or animal spirit companions), grasped the crocodilian beast Tlaltecuhltli in order to tame her and calm the primordial waters that she threatened. They eventually ripped her apart, transporting one half of her body to the sky. Additional deities, believing that Tlaltecuhltli had been mistreated, formed the surface of the earth from her remaining half. The creation of the world was, thus, predicated on an act of bodily dismemberment.

The Codex Fejérváry-Mayer artfully expresses the relationship between dismemberment, in this case rendered in anthropomorphic terms, and cosmic order (Fig. 5.2). Projecting from the center of the composition and expanding out in the intercardinal directions are streams of blood, each of which culminates at the corners in a different body part: a hand, a disembodied head, a rib cage, and a femur. A vertical stack of five calendrical signs also appears at each corner of the composition and represents one of the twenty *trecenas*, or thirteen-day periods, which comprise the *tonalpohualli*, or sacred 260-day calendar. Human dismemberment is linked not only to the organization of cosmic space in the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer but also to the ritual calendar and the very march of time.

Figural expression of the relationship between bodily fragmentation and the calendar can be traced back to the Preclassic period. On Monument 1 from the site of Chocólá, located in the piedmont zone of Suchitepéquez, Guatemala, between Takalik Abaj and Kaminaljuyu (Parsons 1986: 70; Prater 1989; Valdés et al. 2004), an elaborately garbed individual clasps a severed head (Fig. 5.3a). The disembodied head terminates in a trilobate scroll that may well represent blood but whose form also compares to calendrical cartouches like that on

Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 10 (Fig. 5.3b) or the day sign cartouches that appear with great frequency in Classic-period calendrical passages (for discussion, see Houston et al. 2006: 93; Strauss 2018a, b). On Chocólá Stela 1, there appears to be a direct analogy between an act of decapitation and the workings of time. Even earlier, in the imagery and texts associated with Building L-sub at Monte Albán, sacrifice and decapitation were complemented with references to calendrical time (Urcid 2011a: 207).

Bodily fragmentation and acts of creation are also featured in passages in the Ritual of the Bacabs (Velásquez García 2006: 7–8) and in the Chilam Balam book of Maní. In both, the dismemberment of a celestial crocodile led to the establishment of cosmic order and the creation of the earth from its severed remains.⁶ But even more ancient prototypes for these myths appear in Classic Maya hieroglyphic texts, which describe acts of dismemberment that were vital to the ordering of a dangerous universe. The verb used to describe these violent acts is *ch'ak u'baj*, “the chopping of,” which appears in texts describing acts of dismemberment deemed necessary for creation as well as in statements of political charter by rulers (Looper 2012; Stuart 2005: 68–69). David Carrasco elegantly summarized the implications of these mythic passages:

This combination of dismemberment and creation is an empathetic characteristic of Mesoamerican mythology. The creation of the world is constantly joined to the destruction of the world in the mythic narratives. These myths of creation are also myths of destruction, a form of *coincidentia oppositorum*, a juxtaposition of breaking and making. (Carrasco 2000: 249 in Henne 2012: 129)

Henne (2012: 13) made the point that these varied sources also provide a rich context in which to reconsider the Popol Vuh creation story and its use of the term *winaqirik*. *Winaqirik* does not imply some sort of ex nihilo creation but indicates instead that something “became embodied”; body and flesh, he argued, were a prerequisite. Even though the authors of the Popol Vuh did not specify the material from which the earth was formed, Henne maintained that the recurring use of the term *winaqirik* and its derivations – in spite of many other options in the K'iche' language to express concepts of generation – is key to its meaning. The term very clearly communicates the sense of person/human body but, more than that, it also encompasses notions of person/spirit:

First, there is certainly more to a person than a body in K'iche' poetics. However, the binary division of the

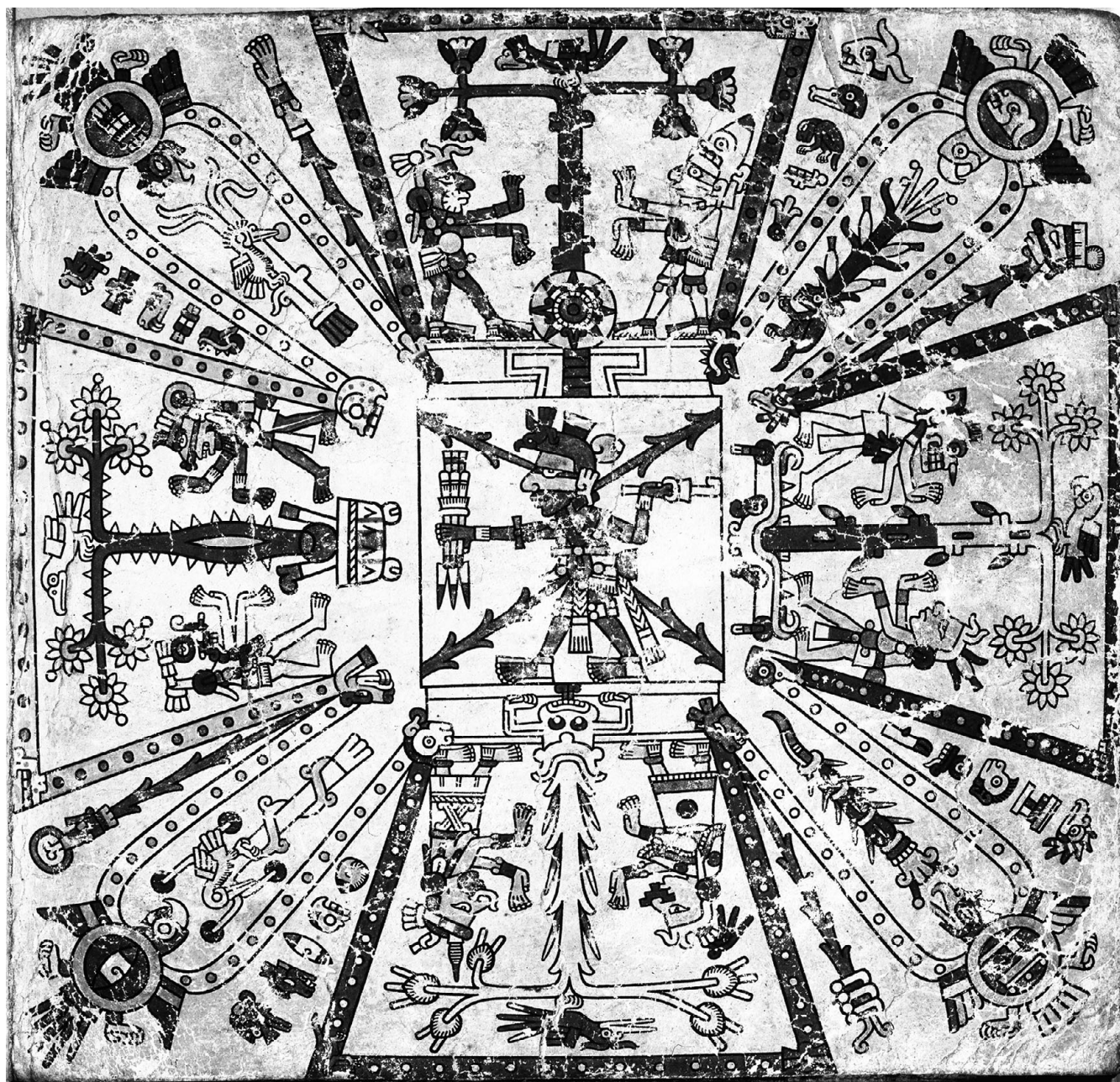


Figure 5.2 Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, page 1, fifteenth to early sixteenth century. Courtesy of the National Museums Liverpool, World Museum

person into body and mind/spirit that underlies Western conceptions of the self – as expressed most famously in Descartes’s *res cogitans* and *res extensa* – does not make the same kind of exclusionary sense in K’iche’ poetics. The self is not divided into these two parts, physical and nonphysical. Each simply encompasses the other such that this body/mind division does not undercut the use of what would – in Western imaginations – be the broader term to call up what would – again, in Western imaginations – be a fraction of it. Therefore, the root “person” could reverse-metonymically indicate the body,

certainly on the poetic level. Although a person is not *only* a body, a person is clearly not a person without a body either; the word for “person” repeatedly called on in this passage poetically calls up the physicality of a person and inserts the body into the background of the creation. (Henne 2012: 132)⁷

Creation in the Popol Vuh was inherently embodied, Henne (2012: 136–137) stipulated, just as in accounts from more northerly realms of Mesoamerica. The use of *winaqirik* clarifies, moreover, that this embodiment was

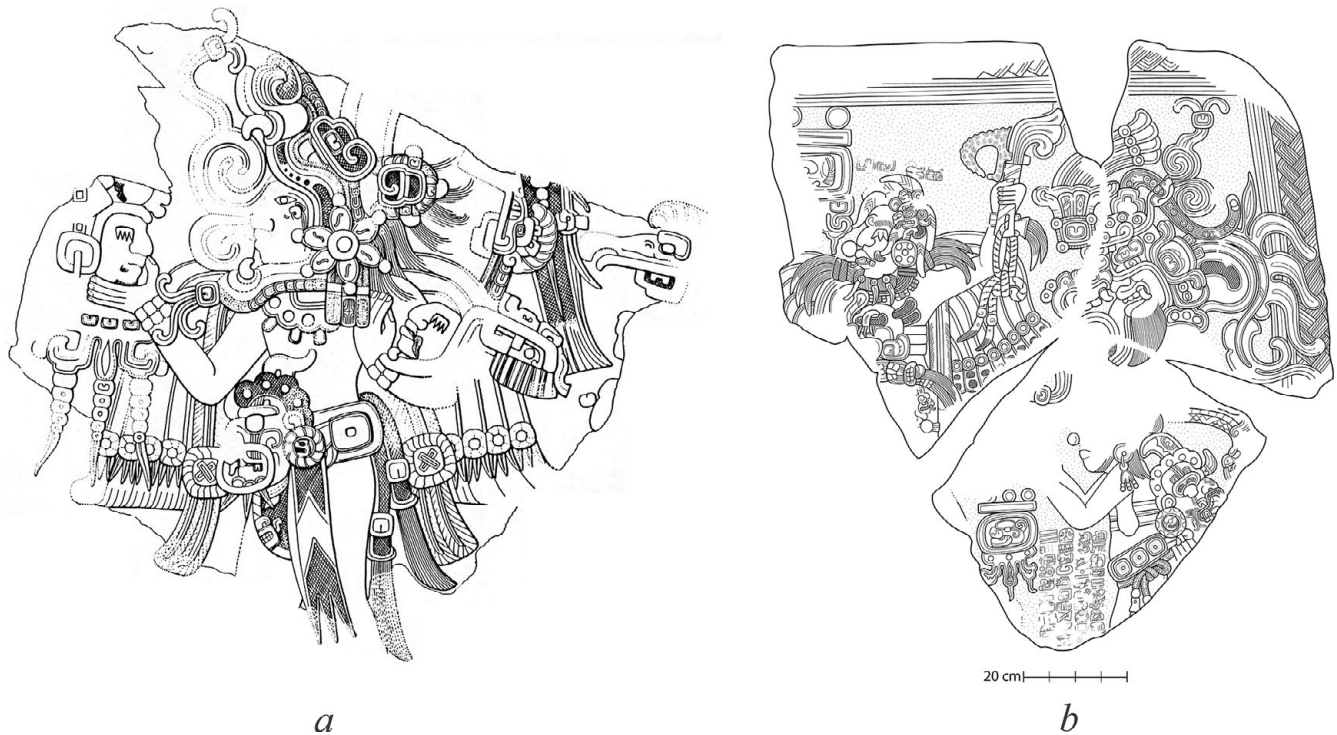


Figure 5.3 Calendrical expressions and bodily fragmentation: (a) Chicolá monument; (b) Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 10. Drawing (a) courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project; drawing (b) by Lucia R. Henderson

viewed in fundamentally human terms.⁸ Especially significant for this discussion is the fact that the *Popol Vuh* also implies that this embodied world was dismembered: to describe the creation of mountain plains the authors use the word *pux*, which is still used in modern K'iche' for "to cut something in pieces" or "the cutting of flesh with a knife."⁹

Embodiment, Materiality, and Clay

Materiality plays a significant role in Mesoamerican creation narratives (Chinchilla 2017: 54), and processes of material transformation – such as converting clay into fire-hardened ceramic – entailed the transmission of vital forces (Houston 2014: 91–98). In the *Popol Vuh*, for example, the creator gods are called *Tz'aqol*, *B'itol*, which translates roughly as "maker, modeler, framer, or shaper." Both Tedlock (1996: 215) and Allen Christenson (2003: 60) interpreted *tz'aqol* as "someone who makes things by adding different components, such as building materials, while *b'itol* was someone who models things by shaping a suitable material such as clay" (Chinchilla 2017: 54). Modern Tzotzil, Q'eqchi', and Lacandon Maya stories describe the modeling of the first humans from clay. These narratives are likely vestiges of ancient myths, like those portrayed on several Classic Maya vases that depict

gods shaping or painting human heads or masks with delicate instruments (Beliaev and Davletshin 2014: figs. 1–3). Dmitri Beliaev and Albert Davletshin (2014: 6) noted that hieroglyphic texts accompanying these scenes include the word *pak'*, which means "to construct" or "to shape by hand." They argued that the images refer to the moment when gods created humans, shaping them from clay. Given its transformational capacity, clay may have been seen as a particularly expressive material from which to craft representations of humans. *B'itol* connotes this, Christenson (2007: 51 n. 13) observed, in that it implies someone who can give "shape to an otherwise amorphous substance." Or, as Tedlock (1985: 347) phrased it, *b'it* "has to do with making definite shapes out of a pliable and otherwise formless material, as when vessels are shaped out of clay."¹⁰

The concept of hardening also appears to have had intrinsic merit for the Maya. Houston (2014: 130) explained that:

Colonial Tzotzil tied it to heightened strength, *yijub*, an aspect of aging, too, with no attendant weakness. According to one source, Colonial Yukatek employed no fewer than twenty-two separate terms for "harden," ranging from associations with strength (*chich*) to harden like clay or fruit (*kuymal*), the shifts in clay an especially common trope (*t'ahlak*, too).

Houston further argued that while stone was often designated as an animate substance imbued with divine qualities by the Maya, clay appears to have been viewed as categorically different, a substance that in and of itself was not animate. It necessitated “an additive or transformative process, a human intervention that seemed to affect, at some profound level, Maya views of those substances” (Houston 2014: 91–98). Some Classic-period artisans labeled fired clay bowls, plaques, and incense burners with the glyph *lak*, which appears to have signified fired, transformed clay, altered “from moist plasticity to solidity” (Houston 2014: 20). Braakhuis (1987: 29) had years ago called attention to an association between artistry and the “working of hard, solid objects.” Reents-Budet (1998: 76) had also noted the symbolic significance of pottery making and, pointing to the Popol Vuh narrative, argued that in firing clay and creating a durable form, artisans surpassed even the gods: an earlier and unsuccessful attempt by the gods to create humans had entailed the use of mud and water. The resultant people could neither speak clearly, properly venerate the gods, nor maintain a solid form. They quickly dissolved in water.

I would suggest that similar ideas concerning the transformational properties of clay, especially when put into the service of human representation, guided the making of Preclassic figurines. Figurines mirror the human body’s capacity for strength, leavened by inevitable vulnerability; they are durable but simultaneously brittle and capable of fragmentation (Long 2011). They reflect the instability of the human body, which is both strong and inherently divisible. Fragmentary figurines may have provided clear reminders of the concomitant physicality and fragility of the human body and carried significance whether whole or fragmentary. In fact, their representational capacity may have hinged in great part on the metonymic ability of each “part” of a figurine to readily evoke the human “whole” from which it derived. Their very materiality, the product of a transformative process, was equally central to their meaning: they materialized durable human representations yet were, fundamentally, of the earth. To my mind, the extraordinary pervasion and persistence of Preclassic figurines provide tantalizing evidence of the antiquity of ideas concerning the modeling of human beings and their relationship to the material substrate of the earth.¹¹ Moreover, the capacity of Preclassic figurines to accommodate acts of both embodiment *and* dismemberment may have been central to their significance and duration as a vehicle of expression. In order to explore these ideas more fully, I begin by presenting the archaeological evidence of fragmentation from a variety of regions in Mesoamerica, paying particular attention to the ways in which the extraordinary

quantities of Preclassic figurine fragments speak to broadly shared notions of social identity rooted in acts of representation *and* bodily division.

Figurines and Fragmentation: The Archaeological Evidence

At La Blanca, well over 5,000 fragmentary figurines have been recovered to date (Fig. 5.4). The quantity of unbroken figurines, missing no parts and fully intact, is dramatically lower, amounting to only two (Michael Love, personal communication, 2014). If “mostly complete” figurines are taken into consideration, including those that are missing only one limb or a minimum number of body parts, the numbers rise to only about ten. Such statistics are telling: the vast majority of figurines are broken or fragmented in a significant manner.

Setting the rarely complete or nearly complete exceptions to the side, one can confidently claim that there is a remarkably consistent pattern of broken figurines at La Blanca and that this pattern is documented in contexts of all sorts, from public spaces to the domestic compounds of both commoners and elites. Throughout the center, in other words, bodily fragmentation was a recurring message (following Gaydarska et al. 2007: 176). However, regardless of the type of space, no pattern of discard is apparent. A greater number of fragmentary heads, for example, does not occur in any one type of context than fragmentary legs. Figure 5.5 illustrates the results of one stratigraphic level in an excavation unit at La Blanca that, like all others, revealed the presence of a mixed lot of heads, torsos, miscellaneous appendages, and even hands and feet, none of which matches up with any other.¹²

A comparable situation characterizes numerous sites and regions throughout Mesoamerica during the Preclassic and later periods. Coe, for example, observed recurring evidence of figurine breakage and decapitation at La Victoria, where he examined 915 Conchas phase figurines. He humorously conceded that

[i]t proved to be absolutely impossible to match any figurine fragment with any other at the site, in spite of many hours spent in the process. Not one head would fit any of the bodies. The ancients must have willfully hurled each fragment from a broken figurine to a different direction. (Coe 1961: 225)

Recurring patterns of breakage also occur in figurine assemblages from Chalcatzingo. Grove and Gillespie (1984; also see Grove 1981) suggested that such breakage represented a form of domestic ritual related to broader practices of monument mutilation and



Figure 5.4 Box of fragmentary figurines at La Blanca. Photo by author

defacement in “public” or non-domestic sectors of the site, a point extended in later publications by Joyce (1998, 2003). At Teotihuacan, Sue Scott (1993: 11) called attention to the repeatedly fragmentary figurines found there. Her analysis of more than 4,000 fragments, and fruitless attempts to join them back together, led her to conclude that the breaking and partial destruction of figurines was an essential aspect of household ritual at Teotihuacan. Lee (1967: 212), pondering the recurring evidence of figurine fragmentation at Chiapa de Corzo, went one step further, speculating that the rituals of human sacrifice documented throughout Mesoamerica might have derived from the ceremonial destruction of Preclassic figurines.¹³

There are practical explanations for fragmentation. Joyce (2007) suggested that the creative process for making Early Preclassic figurines from Honduras involved the modeling of the head and each appendage separately. Individual parts were then pressed onto the figurine’s central core or torso; the resultant weakness of joints

directly contributed to processes of fragmentation, intentional or otherwise.¹⁴ The La Blanca figurines were manufactured in a similar manner that likewise facilitated fragmentation (Fig. 5.6a). Yet at La Blanca there is evidence of figurine breakage in places where the objects were not, intrinsically, as weak. It is also clear that more than a single blow was required to achieve the fragmentation of some figurines: many preserve evidence of a deliberate and repetitive process. We also encounter figurines whose heads have been halved or bodies partially sheared off in a meticulous way (Fig. 5.6b, c).

Working with Preclassic figurines from the Gulf Coast, Follensbee (2009: 89) interpreted breakage across their most structurally strong section as evidence of purposeful fragmentation. Hepp (2015: 76, 266) arrived at a similar conclusion at La Consentida, where only three of the 250 figurines were complete.¹⁵ Similar interpretations of the evidence have been proposed for Middle Preclassic figurines in the Maya Lowlands.¹⁶ At Tikal in the Plaza de los Siete Templos, Halperin (2013: 3, see fig. 5) found



Figure 5.5 Different figurine body parts from a single excavation unit at La Blanca (SM-37-3-19B-145 through 178). Photo by author

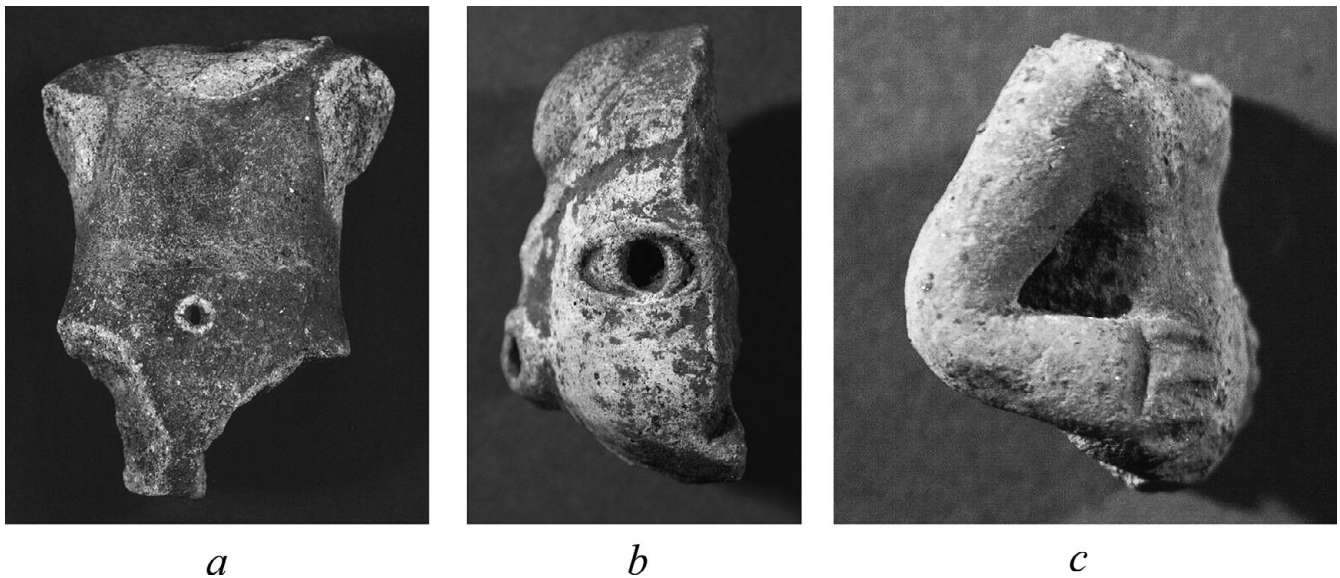


Figure 5.6 Evidence of deliberate figurine breakage at La Blanca: (a) torso with head, arms, and legs removed (SM-90-27-2-250A-191, 8 cm height); (b) head bifurcated down the middle (SM-32-1-8-76, 7 cm height); (c) torso sheared off across the stomach (SM-32-1-19-156, 5 cm height). Photos courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

Preclassic figurine heads that appeared to have been intentionally broken along a center line or deliberately quartered; the breaks did not follow structural weak points. She further noted that some bodies were broken in such small sections that the act of destruction was likely deliberate. Rice (2015: 28), too, argued that the fragmentation of Middle Preclassic figurines from Nixtun-Ch'ich' and Ixlú signified "deliberate and symbolically loaded acts undertaken as part of a ritual process inherent to the figurines' function." She viewed these acts as evidence of an understanding of the body as partible. Fragmentation released "the powerful essences of the body parts of the person or entity represented by the image, allowing them to permeate and animate the area where they are left" (Rice 2015: 7). Rice cautioned that some figurine damage was surely post-depositional. But the intentionality of other acts was made especially clear by one figurine whistle in particular, on which specular hematite had been applied to the legs only *after* being broken (see Rice 2015: fig. 4b).¹⁷ Rice (2015: 30) concluded that acts of fragmentation were "critical to the construction and maintenance of collective identity," in which figurines "helped define and underwrite the roles and authority of nascent lowland elites in the changing circumstances of emergent societal complexity."¹⁸

Evidence from Early Preclassic sites reveals the antiquity of these practices. As will be recalled from *Chapter 3*, while most figurines at Etlatongo, Oaxaca, were found in household refuse, Blomster recorded an anomalously high frequency of fragments in the fill of Unit 1 at that site, which he argued had been used to delimit and elevate that public space. He noted that fragments from some of the figurines could be rejoined, which indicated that "substantial utilization and/or breakage may have actually occurred in the vicinity of Unit 1" (Blomster 2009: 124). He compared this evidence to a contemporaneous deposit at Puerto Escondido, Honduras, where figurines were also used in the fill of early stages of platform construction (R. Joyce 2003: 249).

The deliberate fragmentation of figurines has been linked to social identity and memory. Claudia García-Des Lauriers (2012) documented a cache, deposited between AD 525 and 600 at Los Horcones, Chiapas, of close to sixty whole and fragmentary human and zoomorphic figurine heads, which were interred with ceramic rattles and broken vessels. She suggested that the stylistically diverse figurines symbolized "a microcosm of life" in this commercial crossroads between central Mexico, the Soconusco, and the Guatemalan Highlands. It afforded a "visual discursive of the perhaps very real negotiations of identity that took place daily in the cosmopolitan center of Los Horcones" (García-Des Lauriers 2012: 78–79).

Jeanne Lopiparo and Julia Hendon also interpreted figurine fragmentation in Late to Terminal Classic residential constructions in the Ulúa Valley of Honduras as evidence of social memory. They argued that meaning derived from the social practices associated with the figurine, including its life history and discard:

[Mesoamerican figurines] have often been interpreted as proxies for or icons of humans to be interred, offered, decapitated, or otherwise subjected to corporal mortification to dedicate, terminate, or supplicate. Such interpretations focus on only one stage of figurines' life history, their "death," and on their occurrence in particular kinds of archaeological contexts.... In fact, because most such objects are not found intact in pristine contexts, we should not dismiss this fragmentary evidence simply as garbage or as decontextualized secondary or tertiary deposits. Rather, these deposits emphasize the importance of understanding how figural artifacts were differentially incorporated in human activities and interactions. (Lopiparo and Hendon 2009: 68–69)

Evidence for figurines serving as "proxies" for humans appears very early in Mesoamerica. At Nexpa, Morelos, during the late Early Preclassic period, two figurines (one hollow and one solid) were interred as burial offerings (Vaillant and Vaillant 1934: 50, 53). The head of each figurine had been removed and, as Blomster (2017: 283) described,

buried between the seated figurine's legs ... The decapitation of these figurines suggests a ritual killing, where the animistic forces or energies that might have been inside them were allowed to escape.

At Cahal Pech, Belize, layered ritual deposits at the north and south corners of large Middle Preclassic Platform B, interpreted as a community structure, contained figurines (Cheetham 1998: 43–44). James Garber and Jaime Awe (2008: 187–189) described how one of the layered deposits held a headless figurine, while another contained a disembodied figurine head. Also in Platform B were two stone slab-capped crypts, one of which contained a human skull that had been placed in a bowl, and the other of which held a headless skeleton. Based on this correlation, in which figurine body parts mirrored human body parts, Garber and Awe linked the deposits and figurine fragments to rituals related to the deceased individual. The individuals who orchestrated these deposits were clearly engaged in cognitive processes of recomposition and memory, in which the fragmented figurines shared a conceptual relationship with the dismembered human body.

Comparable evidence for a conceptual relationship between whole/fragmented figurines and intact/

disarticulated human bodies exists from elsewhere in the world. During the early part of the Neolithic period in Europe, fragments of figurines were deposited in large numbers in mortuary contexts along with mostly incomplete skeletal remains. In most cases, individual body parts were arrayed with fragments of pottery and figurines. However, after the custom of burying intact bodies developed, fewer fragmentary figurines were deposited in association with them (Bradley 1998: 36–51; Brück 2006: 299–304). According to John Chapman (2000: 179),

the significance of the increasing frequency of burial of complete articulated bodies is the shift from relations between fragments/complete objects to the relationship between complete objects/sets. This shift in human bodies is related to the change in scale of several different kinds of cultured material.

In his consideration of this evidence, Julian Thomas (2005: 168) concluded that Neolithic communal cemeteries were never places of stasis, but rather spaces of “transformation, through which human bodies passed in the process of becoming something different.”

These points dovetail well with evidence from the Pacific slope of Guatemala. At Middle Preclassic La Blanca, very few burials have been found, but human bone is widely scattered throughout the site from middens to construction fill; according to Michael Love, there are “little bits of people all over the place.” This evidence parallels that of figurines, whose fragmented body parts were dispersed in the thousands throughout the same spaces, including domestic middens and the construction fill of public structures. At La Blanca, human bodies – actual or rendered of clay – were regularly disarticulated and disaggregated, to borrow Thomas’s (2005: 168) words. Yet, toward the end of the Middle Preclassic period, there appears to have been a significant transformation in mortuary behavior in the region of La Blanca (Love 1998: 310; Love and Castillo 1997: 148). These changes coincided with an abrupt decline of figurine usage throughout the region, a situation that I doubt was serendipitous. At the site of El Ujuxte, which rose to fill the power vacuum left by La Blanca’s disintegration, we see the interment of skeletons beneath the floors of houses in residential zones (Love et al. 1996: 15). While many are complete, others indicate that, at times, the bodies were viewed as partible, with various elements (a foot, arm, or head) missing or, in other cases, only a portion of the skeleton, such as the lower limbs, interred (see Arredondo 2000: 19–21, 24, figs. 3-6, 3-9).¹⁹ These data attest to the continuation of acts of fragmentation along the South Coast from the Middle through the Late

Preclassic periods but, just as significantly, a distinct shift in terms of how this fragmentation was expressed: the bodily fragmentation documented at El Ujuxte was directed solely at human skeletons rather than ceramic figurines, very few of which have been recovered from the site.

Blomster (2009, 2011: 112–119, 123–124) related a comparable shift in Oaxacan mortuary ritual to the advent of urbanism at Monte Albán. Mortuary deposits predating the formation of the Zapotec state contain incomplete skeletal remains or single bones from different individuals interred together. Accompanying them was a wide range of complete and fragmented grave goods, including broken clay figurines. With the rise of urbanism at Monte Albán came an increased concern with permanence and a preference for tombs (as opposed to simple graves), which served as sites “where the deceased could be placed and revisited, offerings made, and counsel provided.” This evolution in mortuary practices was accompanied by new forms of material culture including monumental sculpture (Blomster 2011: 124, 128–135) and a marked decrease in figurine production by 200 BC (Marcus 1996: 297).

Bodily Division beyond Figurines

In Preclassic Mesoamerica – or Neolithic Europe, for that matter – practices of fragmentation are best viewed across a spectrum of materialities. Complex relationships between fragmented objects and wholes are easily overlooked if analysis is reduced to discrete categories of objects, focused on more limited segments of time, or isolated from consideration of contemporaneous social transformations. Because of this, I wish to consider several different approaches for thinking about bodily fragmentation, which draw on a variety of data points. Uniting all of these disparate methods is an understanding of the human body as inherently partible.

Synecdoche and *pars pro toto*

Disembodiment and decapitation are prominent themes in the corpus of Mesoamerican art. The colossal heads of the Olmec (Fig. 1.1), as well as the monumental heads at south coast sites like Monte Alto (Fig. 5.7) (Guernsey 2010, 2012; Guernsey and Love 2008), function synecdochally: a single part of the body evokes the whole. As a figure of speech, synecdoche occurs when a part stands in for the whole to which it belongs, as when “counting heads” refers to the act of tallying people. Scherer (2015: 96–97) noted that Tzeltal Maya invoke specific body

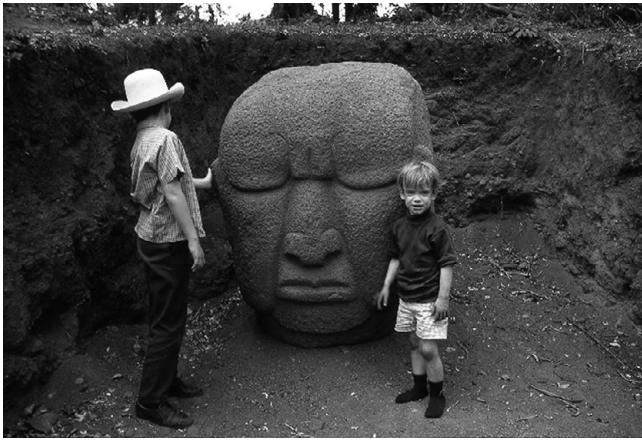


Figure 5.7 Monte Alto Monument 10. Photo by George Stuart, courtesy of David Stuart

parts to represent the whole body, as when the phrase “*ni’il chikinil* (literally ‘nose ear’) is a reference to the face.” Such rhetorical strategies are as at home in material culture as they are in speech and literature. Ian Hodder (1993: 271) noted that quotes, puns, synecdoche, and any number of persuasive strategies can be recovered archaeologically, as in Neolithic Europe where a part of the body of a figurine, such as its belly or buttocks, represents the whole.²⁰ In Mesoamerica, synecdoche – often referred to by the term *pars pro toto* (Coe 1976: 111) – was an important representational mode during the Preclassic period and beyond, with intriguing implications for the perception of the individual and his or her integration within the larger social body (Long 2011).

Representation of the head independent from its body in Mesoamerica has been associated with actual practices of human decapitation (Moser 1973). Ortiz and Rodríguez (2000) linked the dismemberment of infant bodies at El Manatí to the wooden effigies found there that portray only the heads and torsos of individuals.²¹ However, as Gillespie recognized, decapitation in Mesoamerica is not necessarily linked solely to the concept of sacrificial death. It could also symbolize an act of division through which the body was segmented into its constituent parts. For Gillespie (1991: 325), acts of decapitation represented “*par excellence* the introduction of discontinuity into what was once a unified whole, for the human body is a symbol of the cosmos, a ‘microcosm of the universe.’” Gillespie argued that the phenomenon of dismemberment was a part of broader mechanisms for defining and maintaining social boundaries and divisions, which also carried calendrical and astronomical significance.²²

Houston et al. (2006: 100) discussed the animate and partible nature of the human body among the Classic Maya, noting that “the Classic Maya self existed within

a complex ‘bodily matrix’ in which different essences, or ‘souls,’ were connected to different parts of the body, a feature found in many other parts of the world, albeit with subtle variations.”²³ Figurines did not enter into their discussion, but their arguments can be extended quite readily to them. In fact, I would argue that the partibility of the human body is more fully and persistently expressed with figurines than in the monumental record.

Bailey (2007: 113), in a consideration of Neolithic figurines, cautioned that acts of fragmentation have the potential to disrupt seamless associations between the part and the whole:

Dismemberment invites redefinition outside of any commonly accepted understanding of the object in a way and to a degree that can never be possible when encountering the unfragmented whole/closed/finished object as it normally appears. With the collection, ordering, and assembling of disembodied parts, the body can be built up from one piece into a reconstituted whole and may turn out to be very different from the original, pre-fragmented being.

His point was that, with fragmentation, the body parts of figurines could become disconnected pieces; they were visible, but out of context and out of order. The process of reassembling them, visually or in one’s imagination, opened up new meanings that did not, necessarily, lead back to the original whole.²⁴ The relationship between the fragment and the whole, in Bailey’s model, is neither static nor inevitable but, instead, subject to shifting frames of reference that, nevertheless, speak to the connections between individual elements and larger social wholes.

Material Alterations and Transformative Implications

Other explanations for fragmentation have been put forward. Coe (1961: 91–92) speculated that the breakage of figurines at La Victoria reflected a type of calendrically significant ritual killing: “[The figurines], like the pottery and everything else, were purposely and thoroughly smashed by the inhabitants, probably at certain intervals during renewal ceremonies . . . perhaps to prevent them speaking evil or to forestall other unfortunate consequences.” He pointed to a belief held by modern Maya in Honduras that Preclassic figurine heads should be strictly avoided because evil winds escaped from their punched eyes and open mouths (Coe 1961: 92). Ethnographically documented reasons for the ritual killing of objects include fear of pollution, repugnance at reuse, and the desire to avoid association with the property of the deceased or that of supernaturally endowed personages (Corbey 2003). In most cases, however, “terminated”



Figure 5.8 Aztec New Fire ceremony from Sahagún's Florentine Codex (1950–1982: book 7: fol. 21). Drawing by author

objects are deposited as complete sets of fragments or with special ritual care such as caching; by contrast, figurines are frequently, although not exclusively, found in middens and secondary contexts (see Mock 1998).

Byron Hamann, building on Mary Douglas's (1966) consideration of dirt as “matter out of place,” linked acts of deliberate destruction in Aztec rituals such as the New Fire Ceremony to concepts of purity and pollution (Fig. 5.8). A passage from Sahagún (1950–1982: bk. 7: 25; also see Elson and Smith 2001: 158) vividly describes these acts: “First they put out the fires everywhere in the country round. And the statues, hewn in either wood or stone, kept in each man's home and regarded as gods, were all cast into the water.” Hamann (2008) suggested that the Aztec concept of *tlazolli* elucidated these acts of destruction and discard whose goal was to purify the world prior to the dawning of a new cycle of time. The term *tlazolli* refers to “little bits and pieces of things,” “something used up, which has lost its original order or structure,” or even trash and garbage (Hamann 2008: 805–806; also see Burkhart 1989: 87–88).²⁵ *Tlazolli*, Hamann (2008: 807, 809–812) explained, was both powerful and dangerous. Broken and discarded potsherds in the form of caches, offerings, and ritual deposits lent their power to structures like the Templo Mayor (also see Smith 2002: 101) or were incorporated into the exterior walls of temple structures.

For Hamann, broken objects signified “matter out of time.” They were not necessarily worn out in a visible or

material sense, but were in need of removal “because the temporal horizon in which they existed was about to change.” They were exhausted but not powerless, and their removal “prevented the sudden and *uncontrolled* chronological pollution of residential spaces” (Hamann 2008: 808, emphasis in original). Scott Hutson and Travis Stanton (2007: 137–138) discussed a passage in Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatan* that describes New Year rituals not unlike those of the Aztecs in which discarded items were meaningful to the Maya “even if never touched again.” They argued that these meanings could be extended to offerings of pottery fragments in caves. These deposits sometimes incorporated unreconstructible figurine fragments, as at community cave ritual sites in the Petén and Petexbatún regions of Guatemala (Halperin 2014: 197–198).

I am not suggesting that Preclassic figurine fragmentation is synonymous with Hamann's concept of Aztec *tlazolli* or that the discard of Preclassic figurines is equivalent to cave rituals documented throughout the Petén. But I do believe these arguments, and especially their emphasis on the calendrical significance of such acts, go some way to explaining why fragments of Preclassic figurines wound up in trash middens in spite of being laden with meanings concerning selfhood, social identity, and cycles of time. Perhaps Preclassic figurine fragments ran the risk of becoming “matter out of time,” and needed to be swept into the garbage in order to prepare for a new calendrical cycle or period of renewal (following Coe 1961: 91–92).²⁶

The figurine fragments from Early and Middle Preclassic middens are usually not conducive to ready reassembly, which suggests that what was swept into the garbage was what remained of previously fragmented and dispersed figurines. It may be that what we see in middens (or construction fill, which was likely taken from middens) is the symbolic evidence of social relationships that needed to be ended and/or renewed with the advent of a new calendrical cycle. While such ideas are purely hypothetical, they draw on a range of evidence and associations that are worth pondering. My best guess is that Preclassic figurines embodied any number of meanings, were used in a variety of contexts and for a variety of reasons, and were also disposed of – or retained or deposited – in multiple ways.

Evidence from the Postclassic period confirms a variety of contexts and discard patterns for figurines. While many were broken and tossed into middens during New Fire ceremonies, others were collected and curated in households within the Aztec empire (Brumfiel and Overholtzer 2009). Hamann (2008: 808–812) noted that some were even repaired and returned to places of

veneration where they escaped, at least for a while, a fate as *tlazolli*.²⁷ Lisa Overholtzer and Wesley Stoner (2011: 186) noted that not just any figurine was considered desirable, however: faces were preferred over bodies and nearly every curated example possessed a complete face. They attributed this penchant, which is surely in keeping with Mesoamerican conceptions of the head as the locus of identity, to an interest in stylistically distinct faces that contrasted with those crafted in the local Aztec style.

Acts of deliberate fragmentation and destruction in Mesoamerica were not, of course, limited to pottery and figurines. Already by 1940, Stirling (1940: 334) had voiced the opinion that the broken and mutilated monuments he encountered in the Olmec region could not be explained away as accident. Scholars like Coe (1967, 1968) and Grove (1981: 49) echoed this assessment, further asserting that acts of mutilation were imbued with symbolism and designed to neutralize the objects. As Genevieve Fisher and Diana DiPaolo Loren (2003: 229) put it, Olmec monuments “enjoyed only temporary bodily integrity before successor rulers fragmented, moved, and re-cycled them in the service of their own political agendas. Positioned in areas of mixed activity, these monumental figures subliminally fixed and reinforced popular understandings of bodily practices and ideals.”

For Clark, the breaking or defacement of a sculpture divested it of power (Clark 1997; Clark and Colman 2013: 25). The targeting of facial features, in particular, rendered monuments unable to see or hear (Clark and Colman 2014). Just (2005: 69) commented on the irony of this evidence, in which the inherent permanence of stone “renders sculpture in this medium particularly susceptible to, and often inciting, physical modification, while fundamentally resisting complete termination.” The full meaning of sculpture does not reside only in the object’s original state, Just argued, but was transformed through its “mutability and ontological dynamism” (see Pollard 2004). Even *pieces* of sculpture retained their potency, which was “likely transferred to and incorporated by” structures into which monumental fragments were interred (Just 2005: 71).²⁸

Not surprisingly, acts of fragmentation likewise extend to small-scale stone sculpture. Middle Preclassic greenstone figures display similar patterns of breakage, some of which appear to be the result of “intentional and controlled mutilation” (Taube 2004: 100). This evidence illustrates especially clearly the intentionality of acts of fragmentation during the Preclassic period (John Clark, personal communication, 2015). While ceramic figurines are inherently susceptible to fragmentation, deliberate or otherwise, arguments for weak joints or unstable methods of manufacture are less applicable to

certain greenstone objects. The fragmentation seen in jade and other economically valuable objects instead argues for acts of transformation linked to the role of the objects in enchain social systems, through which they were passed down and recycled (Clark and Colman 2013: 24, after Chapman 1998, 2000).

Partibility in Mesoamerica was clearly not just for clay objects, or those crafted through an additive process or assembled from multiple parts; stone was also partible. This conclusion contrasts with one reached by Bailey (2017: 837, following Nanoglou 2008a: 318–319) for the Neolithic period in southeastern Europe. He determined that stone was less subject to fragmentation because it was understood as “embodying cohesiveness.” In Preclassic Mesoamerica, fragmentation was a persistent cultural trope unimpeded by particular mediums or forms of expression.

The destruction of sculpture and figurines in Mesoamerica was also likely premised on the fact that such objects were more than mere representations: hieroglyphic evidence suggests they were the extendable essences of the person portrayed (Houston and Stuart 1998; also see my discussion in Chapter 1). Similar understandings characterized the Byzantine world, in which iconoclastic acts hinged on an understanding of a real presence in the image, be it a god’s divinity or a person’s memory (Elsner 2012: 373). Elsner (2012: 369) stressed that the flip side of destruction was “image cultivation,” which took ritual or devotional form. In Mesoamerica, too, the mutilation of figural representations was laden with transformative implications that went well beyond surface or material alterations.

Human Remains and Partibility

Disembodied body parts in the visual record mirrored those of actual human bones, and it is my belief that these parallels are at the heart of the cultural trope of fragmentation in Mesoamerica. Yet the meanings of fragmentary body parts documented archaeologically diverge, dependent on their contexts and attendant associations. At times, body parts memorialized battle victories. Scherer (2015: 100) argued that “[t]he depiction of captives and the display of their body parts operated as perpetual claims of dominion of the captors over the corporal existence of their enemy.” Body parts of enemies, he continued, “operated as metonyms for the places and polities from which they were taken” (Scherer 2015: 102). Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions, for example, explicitly refer to war captives as the “bones” of their owners.²⁹

The deposition of disarticulated bones was also associated with acts of monumental construction,

commemoration, and placemaking. At Kaminaljuyu during the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic period, c. 300 BC, a mass ceremonial deposit including thirty-three crania (most missing their mandibles), in addition to one intact skeleton, figurines, a whistle, and a large quantity of ceramic sherds and obsidian and mica chips, was discovered between Mounds C-IV-1 and C-IV-4 (Velásquez 1993). The assemblage was orchestrated around a central component: a single vase containing a decapitated head. Juan Luis Velásquez (1993: 172) interpreted this event as evidence of ritual sacrifice associated with new architectural construction at Kaminaljuyu during a period in which the community was, as Love (2011a: 10) phrased it, “on the cusp of full-fledged urbanism.”

At the Lowland Maya site of Ceibal sometime around 400 BC, a series of dismembered bodies was deposited in a plaza as part of what Inomata (2013, 2014) interpreted as a public ceremony through which “a new community was constituted.” The remains also suggested to Inomata (2014: 27) that not all of the social transformation symbolized by the deposit transpired harmoniously; the transition was rife with “negotiations and contestations among community members.” The Postclassic Maya remains in a grave at Zacpeten demonstrate the endurance of such practices. William Duncan and Kevin Schwarz (2014) noted that the bodies had been deliberately fragmented and manipulated into distinct groupings. They viewed the grave as “an attempt to fragment, appropriate, and agglomerate enemies’ bodies into a collective but highly public monument to their defeat” (Duncan and Schwarz 2014: 150).

The salience of these ideas for Middle Preclassic groups on the Pacific slope is underscored by recent excavations at the site of Reynosa, in Escuintla. Héctor Mejía and Shintaro Suzuki (2016) discovered a mortuary mound that contained several layers of burials. Most of the interred were male, but females and infants were also included. Of note is the fact that the interment showed evidence of dismemberment of some of the bodies, with decapitated crania placed on ceramic plates. In other cases, there was evidence of bundled groups of bones. Based on initial radiocarbon dates, Mejía and Suzuki suggested that this mass burial event transpired during the latter years of the Middle Preclassic period, c. 350 BC.

Bodily partibility and the potency of bones are a recurring theme throughout Mesoamerica. Pamela Geller (2004) argued that the removal of bones from burials, or relic taking, provided a means for an individual to “tap into the skeletal element’s power” and rested on the belief that “corporeal wholeness was not a precondition for social potency” (Geller 2014: 31, 304).³⁰ She pointed

to an Aztec story, described by Frances Berdan (1982: 83), about women who died in childbirth and were then venerated as deities:

When her relatives went to bury her, they had to guard her carefully, since young warriors eagerly sought her middle finger and locks of her hair. These they would place on their shields when they went into battle to assure themselves of courage and success in capturing enemy warriors. Similarly, thieves tried to steal her left forearm, which reputedly assisted them in their “business.”³¹

For the Aztecs, physical remains could be mobilized, worn, and exchanged in meaningful ways among the living.³² The belief that one’s ancestry or key aspects of social identity were inherited through parts of the body suffused Aztec language, metaphor, and ritual practice. Furst (1995: 125) pointed out that the Aztec soul, the *tonalli*, “passed from generation to generation . . . [and] appears in the body as hair, fingernails, and the blood.” She cited Sahagún’s description of an Aztec newborn as the “precious feather, the precious green stone, the bracelet” and as “their [ancestors’] chip, their flake” (Furst 1995: 125). The passage indicates that the Aztecs thought of individuals as fragments of their ancestors or “chips off the old block.” But the poetic description also intimates that some “precious” goods were inalienable, revered as family heirlooms and memory objects that materialized one’s relationship to deceased ancestors.

A passage from the Popol Vuh attests to the importance of ancestral bones among the Maya. During the founding of one of the great capitals of the K’iche’ people, the ruling lords “turned on each other, desecrating the bones and the skulls of the dead” (Christenson 2003: 267). Christenson explained that the K’iche’ word used in the passage translates literally as “turning over” and vividly describes the physical act – one of turning over, or disturbing, the bones of ancestors – and its significance, which was “far more serious than to insult the living members of the lineage.” Interpreting the archaeological significance of fragmentary, but deliberately assembled, bones is often more complex. For example, Geller (2004: 304–305) discussed evidence of cached human finger bones at a number of sites.³³ She suggested that the caches relate to a story concerning women who removed a portion of the finger of a male child on his death (cf. Wilkerson 1984: 109–110). But she also acknowledged that it is difficult to categorize such acts unequivocally as either veneration or desecration; either way, she concluded, “body parts disassociated from whole bodies” were powerful (also see Geller 2012, 2014).³⁴

Human bodies in Mesoamerica were truly extendable in the sense that the essence of any individual was



Figure 5.9 El Jobo Stela 1. Photo courtesy of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1958 © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM58-34-20/40390 (digital file #CI633609)

contained in individual body parts whose potency stretched across space and through time, even when separated from a once-whole human. These ideas are vividly asserted in the artistic record. On an unprovenienced stela from the Usamacinta region a woman grasps a femur in an act of conjuring. Scherer (2015: 98–99, fig. 2.59b) linked the scene to burial practices throughout the region in which the removal of skeletal elements from graves is well documented.³⁵ Late Preclassic evidence of similar displays exists. In the scene of sacrifice on El Jobo Stela I (Fig. 5.9), the severed head dangling upside down from the protagonist's left hand may correlate – in spite of an enormous disparity in terms of scale – with the decapitated body of the victim who kneels at his feet.³⁶ In his right hand the standing figure clasps an object that appears to represent a right human femur whose condyles are visible at the top of the staff; the head of the femur is visible beneath his clenched hand (Lori Hager, personal communication, 2019; also see Guernsey 2018; Miles 1965: 259).

Blomster documented the long history of the dissemination of physical remains, their significance to

constructions of personhood among the living, and their incorporation into the visual culture of ancient Oaxaca. He pointed to stylistically Late Preclassic limestone skulls whose primary context is lost, but which were assimilated into a Classic-period public building at Huamelulpan (Blomster 2011: 126–127; Gaxiola González 1984). He also noted that the artistic program begun at Monte Albán in Building L sometime after 500 BC included four images of disembodied heads, three with blood scrolls flowing from them and one (J-112) eliciting a speech scroll as if animated even in death (Blomster 2011: 129). Blomster (2011: 135) called further attention to several ceramic vessels at Monte Albán, contemporaneous with the carved slabs on the walls of Building J (Carter 2017), which take the shape of human spinal columns and include anatomical details (Caso et al. 1967: plate XIb). These vessels recall examples made from actual human bone, as in the case of an Early Preclassic bone saucer from San José Mogote (Flannery and Marcus 2005: 358, fig. 19.2c) and a shallow bowl carved from a human skull in a Late Preclassic burial at Tomaltepec (Blomster 2011: 135; Whalen 1981: 153–154).

Bodily fragmentation was a central feature of Early and Middle Preclassic artistic programs beyond the disembodied heads of Monte Alto and the Olmec region. Joyce (1998: figs. 9, 12) illustrated a number of examples including an effigy vessel from Tlatilco that depicts a human calf and foot as well as pottery stamps from Chalcatzingo shaped as feet. She viewed such representations as evidence of “the possibilities of action of the liberated body parts” (R. Joyce 1998: 156). The disembodied hands that appear on a vessel from Tlapacoya reverberate with the same partibility but also include what may be eyes at their wrists (Neiderberger 2000: fig. 10).³⁷ Other examples of bodily fragmentation include a pair of flat, elegant, jade hands found in the basalt column tomb at La Venta (Drucker 1952: plate 54b), or the pearl oyster hand-shaped jewel from the Middle San José phase at San José Mogote (Flannery and Marcus 2005: fig. 9.10, 1).

A brief survey of the *Olmec World* catalogue (Princeton 1995: 256–257) reveals that miscellaneous body parts, carved from jade, were worn as jewelry. These objects illustrate that bodily fragmentation was not just something people “did” during the Middle Preclassic, but also something that people “wore.”³⁸ A necklace formed of a series of human legs, carved from blue-green jade, exemplifies this (Princeton 1995: fig. 162). The necklace operated on a number of different levels: it invoked the human form while being displayed on a human body and, simultaneously, signaled an elevated social status. It was part of a social matrix involving personal adornment, status, and identity, all envisioned through reference to

bodily fragmentation memorialized in jade (Fisher and Loren 2003: 228; R. Joyce 1998, 1999, 2005).

A fragmentary pendant, perforated for suspension, was recovered from an elite household at La Blanca and features a human body splayed out and framed in a scalloped cartouche (Fig. 5.10). It can be viewed, following Joyce (2003: 259), as a point of recursion between practice and the act of representation. While designed to be worn, this representation of a human body was ultimately fragmented and discarded, much like the broken figurines found in association with it. Traditions of effigy body fragments worn as ornaments persisted, as a probable Early Classic jadeite bead, part of a cache from a tomb in northwestern Guatemala, reveals (Pillsbury et al. 2012: 215, plate 28). The bead, which portrays a closed human



Figure 5.10 Front and back views of fragmentary pendant from an elite household at La Blanca featuring a splayed human body within a scalloped cartouche (SM-37-4-R153-32). Photo courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

hand and an anthropomorphized beaded cuff, was drilled for suspension through its length.

An explicit scene of dismemberment appears on the Early Classic Hauberg Stela (Fig. 5.11a). Three severed human bodies, intact only from the waist up and issuing curling volutes of blood or some other substance from their torsos, descend down a scroll that emanates from the mouth of a standing figure with supernatural attributes (Finnamore and Houston 2010: 252, fig. 4). Houston et al. (2006: 93–95) suggested that the imagery concerns dynastic foundings and the sacrifices of apical ancestors.³⁹ The imagery also corresponds to burials documented elsewhere. In Late Preclassic Structure E3-7 of the El Trapiche Group at Chalchuapa, Fowler (1984: 608) excavated bodies severed in half at the waist in Burials 18 and 32. A Classic Veracruz-style *palma* displays an equally vivid reference to human partibility (Fig. 5.11b). Human legs and a pelvis appear on one side, while its opposite side features arms and a head (Chinchilla 2014; Gillespie 1991; Parsons 1969). Gillespie (1991: 334–335) noted that, if positioned on an individual's waist, the object would have reiterated “the conceptual division of the body.” Monuments from Tajumulco, Guatemala, reveal similar messages, although establishing dates for them is difficult given their lack of archaeological context. Tajumulco Sculpture J/O portrays a disembodied yet “heroic appendage” whose large size partially

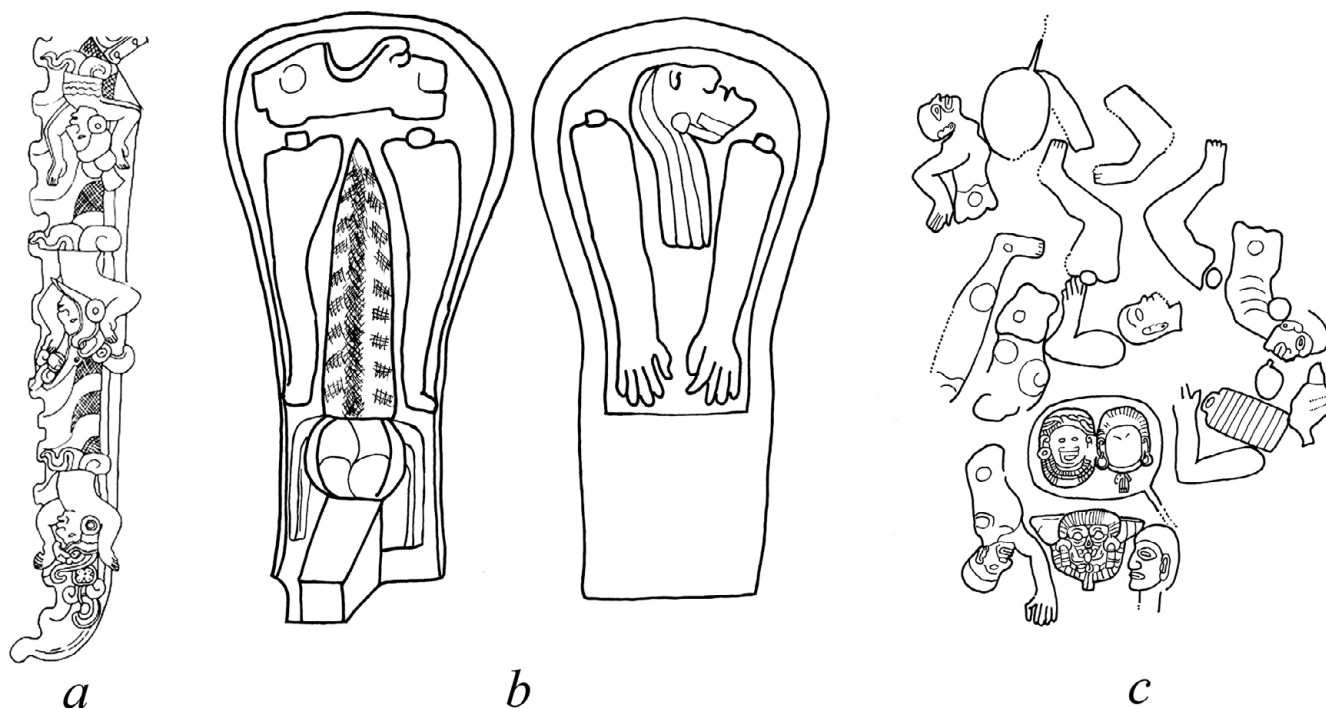


Figure 5.11 Bodily fragmentation in sculpture: (a) detail of the Hauberg Stela; (b) Veracruz *palma*; (c) detail of Bilbao Monument 93. Drawing (a) by Linda Schele courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.; drawing (b) by Susan Gillespie; drawing (c) by author after Chinchilla (2014: fig. 11)

obscures the smaller human figure behind it (Dutton and Hobbs 1943: fig. 21). A similarly large, disembodied hand appears on Tajumulco Stone Sculpture Number 13 (Dutton and Hobbs 1943: 43, fig. 19). Virginia Miller (2007) linked the recurring motifs of skulls and bones at Chichén Itzá to practices of both sacrifice and ancestor worship.

Images of decapitation appear with some frequency in the art of the Pacific coastal region. It is remarkably explicit on El Jobo Stela 1 (Fig. 5.9) and Izapa Stela 21 (Fig. 6.4b) (Chinchilla 2014; Guernsey 2018). However, on Late Classic Bilbao (Cotzumalguapa) Monument 1, ritual sacrifice is presented quite differently. Chinchilla (2014: fig. 7; also see Gillespie 1991: 334 and Parsons 1969: 104) noted that the central figure of the composition stands on a dismembered body that lacks arms, legs, and a head. “Circles of severance” mark the sockets from which limbs have been torn. A comparable theme of dismemberment appears on Bilbao Monument 93, which features a variety of severed body parts including legs, arms, heads, and torsos (Fig. 5.11c) (Chinchilla 2014: 6–11).

Chinchilla (2014: 5) recognized that the theme of dismemberment in the Cotzumalguapa region is prefigured by Early Classic Teotihuacan-style *incensarios* from the Pacific Coast that “represent temples with rows of severed arms hanging from the roof.”⁴⁰ At Teotihuacan proper, Pasztory (1997: 198) noted that different types of body parts substituted for specific classes of individuals in the mural programs: hearts stood in for humans, while

eyes, mouths, hands, and claws signified deities.⁴¹ Pasztory (1997: 238) viewed the “insistence on fragmentation” that characterizes Teotihuacan art as “a way of expressing that the individual is but a small part of a total human or cosmic community and not a totality in him- or herself.”⁴²

There is additional pictorial evidence at Teotihuacan for bodily partibility, and, I would add, it may very well reference the practices of bodily fragmentation that were enacted on figurines in this urban metropolis. Charles Wicke (1954; also see von Winning 1991) observed that the tiny human figures in the Tepantitla mural compare closely to “portrait” figurines from Teotihuacan (Fig. 5.12a, b). One of these tiny figurine-like characters in the Tepantitla mural is being drawn and quartered or broken apart in the same manner as the thousands of ceramic figurines at Teotihuacan.⁴³ Perhaps the disembodied leg and long bone annotating the speech scroll uttered by another tiny human in the Tepantitla mural refers to these very acts of bodily division (Fig. 5.12c). Centuries later at the Late Postclassic site of Teopanzolco, Morelos, the relationship between severed bodies and fragmented human representations was made explicit (Zaid Lagunas Rodríguez and Carlos Serrano Sánchez 1972: 431). There, approximately ninety-two dismembered individuals in an interment were associated with similarly decapitated and dismembered Aztec style ceramic figurines as well as vessels, obsidian blades, and spindle whorls.⁴⁴

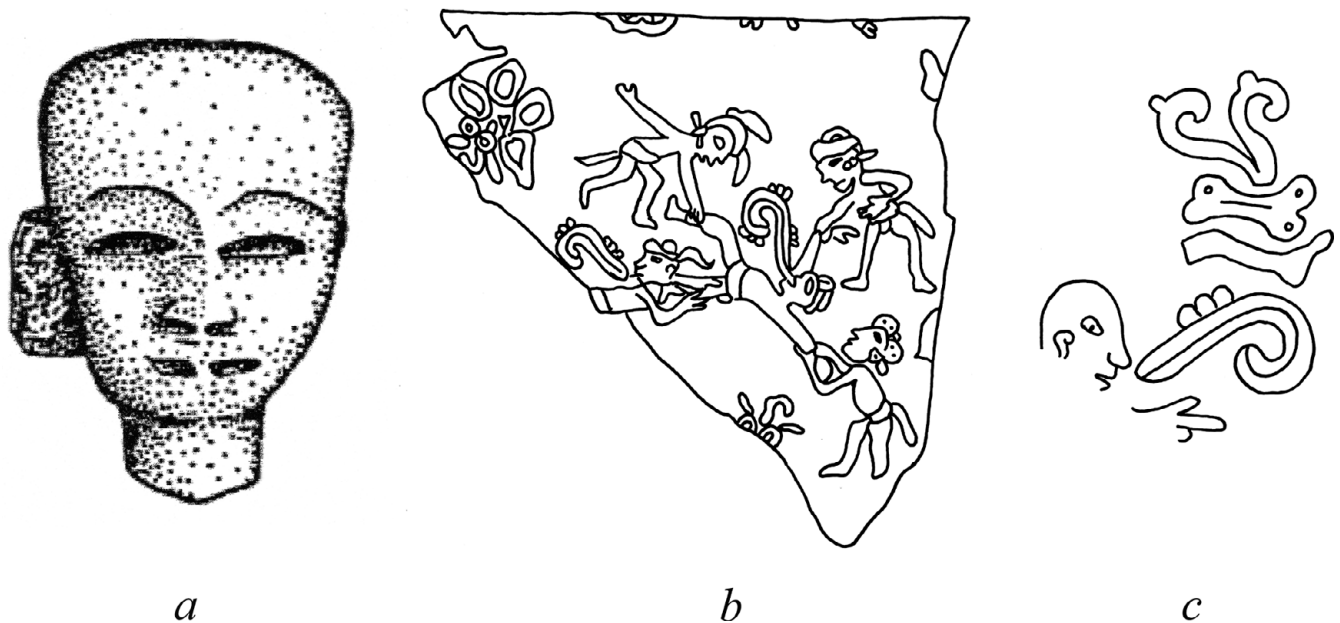


Figure 5.12 Bodily fragmentation at Teotihuacan: (a) “portrait” figurine; (b) detail of drawing and quartering scene in the Tepantitla mural; (c) detail of speech glyphs in the Tepantitla mural. Drawings by author after Goldsmith (2000: fig. 24), Pasztory (1976: fig. 36), and Mora-Marín (n.d.).

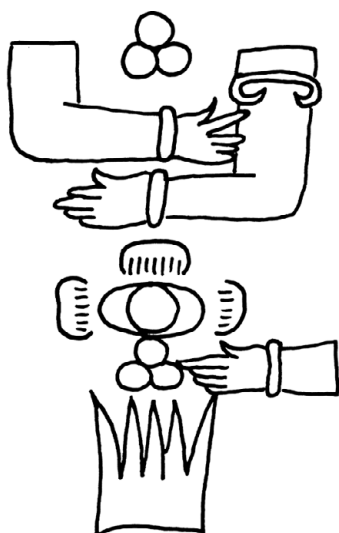


Figure 5.13 Detail of the Humboldt Celt. Drawing by author after Coe (1965: fig. 18)

Bodily partibility also plays a key role in Mesoamerican script traditions (Houston 2004: 284; Justeson 1986; Justeson and Mathews 1990; Mora-Marín 2018: 98). David Mora-Marín (2009: 408, following Justeson 1986) noted that on the Humboldt Celt, “parts of two different events are isolated and used to represent their respective wholes” (Fig. 5.13). Since the imagery depicts two arms *and* another forearm, either two different people are implied by the disembodied limbs or, alternatively, two different actions performed by a single individual are indicated. López-Austin (1997: 238) made a similar observation concerning the Aztecs, for whom disembodied hands and feet were symbolic of “the ability to do things.” In the Zapotec script tradition, which developed by 500 BC in the Valley of Oaxaca, isolated hands also signify action (Urcid 2001: 392).

Fragmented body parts that appear in both representational form and script traditions characterize other parts of the world as well. Karnava (2015: 147) discussed the relationship between fragmentary body parts and writing in the Bronze Age Aegean. She noted that the fragmented body parts in early script traditions were mirrored by votive human body parts formed from clay (which are recovered archaeologically in sanctuaries and settlement areas). In her opinion, a significant source of inspiration for early pictographic or iconographic writing systems came from the “array of tangible objects, or parts thereof,” which included the miniature disembodied body parts in the form of votive offerings.⁴⁵ Many of the fragmentary votive body parts, she added, were perforated, designed to be suspended and worn. This is not unlike ancient Mesoamerica, where disembodied body parts were worn as ornament, appear in nascent writing systems, were modeled in

and carved from various materials, and were viewed as potent objects in and of themselves. Body parts, already by the Early Preclassic period in Mesoamerica, operated in an interval matrix of meaning.

Enchainment

Enchainment provides another explanatory framework for bodily fragmentation grounded in understandings of the human body as an object of memory and marker of social identity. The term “enchainment” was first introduced by Marilyn Strathern (1988). It was adopted by Chapman (2000; Chapman and Gaydarska 2007) for his work on Neolithic figurines to describe processes of fragmentation, which he viewed as evidence for the negotiation of social relationships that structured prehistoric life during a period of deepening of social complexity. Research by scholars in the Old World has demonstrated the value of an enchainment model for investigating how groups may have facilitated the negotiation of identity through the representation of relationships with other people, places, and things (Fowler 2002; Talalay 1993: 35). A simple example illustrates the concept. When two or more individuals wish to mark their relationship or a mutual transaction, they break a particular object, which symbolizes their union, into parts; each party then retains a piece. In accordance with the principle of *pars pro toto*, each piece invokes the whole from which it derives and serves as a tangible symbol of their enchainment relationship. These tokens, in turn, can be broken down further and transmitted to other individuals, thereby extending the enchainment social network (Chapman 2000: 12–14). The enchainment model, when applied to ancient figurine fragmentation, however, has received both accolades and criticism. Marcus Brittain and Oliver Harris (2010) explained that its utility rests in its ability to encompass the indissoluble relationships that were embodied by figurines and maintained in spite of their fragmentation. Its weakness lies in its argument, more often assumed than demonstrated, that fragments of fractured figurines were exchanged throughout a social sphere.

Chapman’s enchainment model built off the work of Lauren Talalay (1987, 1993: 45–46), who argued that a set of disembodied figurine legs from the Neolithic cave site of Franchithi in Greece served as a tangible symbol of an enchainment relationship. Snapping the fragmentary legs from the torso was accomplished through repeated acts of smoothing and burnishing, which weakened the object and facilitated breakage. Each of the corresponding pieces could have been exchanged between parties, with each party keeping one half as proof of their identity and their relationship (Talalay 1987: 161–163). More recently, Bisserka Gaydarska, John Chapman, Ana Raduncheva, and Bistra

Koleva (2007: 171) provided a brief but practical historiography of the ideas involved in fragmentation, enchainment, or, as they phrased it, a *chaîne opératoire* method that recognizes the entire use life of any given figurine.⁴⁶ The method enabled Gaydarska and colleagues to analyze the various modifications made to figurines before their final discard through attention to biographical details including how they were broken and where. It also took into consideration whether discarded figurine fragments could be fitted back together with other fragments, on site or off, or whether they were “orphaned” (Gaydarska et al. 2007: 172).

Deliberately fragmented objects have shaped the ways in which social and economic relationships were imagined and communicated throughout much of history, and Mesoamerican figurines can be productively framed within these same parameters (Long 2011: 100). In Europe during the Middle Ages, before the advent of the written charter, two parts of an object – such as a knife or a sword – were frequently exchanged between two parties in a legal agreement (Clanchy 1993). Specific types of contractual documents called chirographs were similarly designed to prevent forgery of important transactional records. The documents were recorded in duplicate, triplicate, or quadruplicate and then cut, with a wavy or jagged line, into pieces for individual parties to retain. Fitting the pieces back together authenticated the agreement (Clanchy 1993: 105–108).

Enchainment models are not only applicable to exchanges between living people; they can just as readily incorporate recently deceased kin and their material remains, which serve as reminders of the deceased individual’s continued presence in the world of the living (Chapman 2000).⁴⁷ In the case of bodily remains, the process of remembering did not depend on any particular technology or form of craft production. Instead, what was essential was recognition of the body, its parts, and the identity that suffused them as synecdochical. The mobility of physical remains through time and space allowed for the formulation and recollection of complex identities and interpersonal relationships even in the absence of specialized forms of representation, as best evidenced in Mesoamerica by relic taking and ritualized interactions between the living and the dead.

Long (2011) discussed further examples from historical contexts in Europe that provide instructive analogies for envisioning how transformations in social practices, particularly concerning the remains of deceased individuals, resulted in certain body parts and associated materials becoming vessels for enchainment. In medieval popular belief, the physical remains, clothing, and personal effects of saints were regarded as relics, imbued with a special potency referred to as *virtus* (Brown 1981: 36).

The *virtus* derived, originally, from the saints themselves, but its full potency extended to their relics and did not diminish if the saint’s body or relics were disassembled. In fact, it was a commonplace strategy to disseminate their power further afield through disassembly (Brown 1981: 57), where the fragmentary relics or body parts served as sites of collective memory and ritual (Le Goff 1992). These ideas fell out of favor during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but many of the concepts were transferred into everyday life, where human remains continued to enchain living and dead persons, especially in the form of jewelry crafted from the physical remains of the deceased person (Pointon 1999). In other words, Mary Pointon maintained, even though there was a clear shift in terms of social practices through time, the fundamental significance of bodily relics remained unchanged.

An enchainment model has also been used to discern meaning in acts of ritual termination in ancient Mesoamerica. Linda Howie, Christine White, and Fred Longstaffe (2010: 376) described deliberately broken vessels interred in burials at the site of Lamanai, Belize, during the Early Postclassic period:

[T]he ceramics within burials exhibit patterns of preinterment breakage – i.e. whole vessels are usually entirely absent, and the fragments of broken vessels are placed alongside and scattered over the corpse. Given the specific placement of the pottery fragments within these burials, and since they are largely restorable into complete forms, it would appear that the original vessels were intentionally smashed just prior to interment as part of funerary rites. In addition, in every instance where smashed vessels were interred, pieces of each of the vessels recovered from the burial are missing, suggesting that the fragments were retained by participants in the burial ceremony, perhaps as a memento of the occasion or for some other purpose such as maintaining ancestral connections.

They concluded that “[t]he shift towards the preinterment breakage of funerary vessels and the subsequent retention of pieces of them by funeral participants is also significant because these acts transformed and extended the functions of vessels. Pieces of these vessels were intentionally kept in active use, remaining a part of daily life as material expressions of the shared experiences and interrelationships of members of the family, both living and deceased” (Howie et al. 2010: 393).

Mesoamerican figurine studies have also benefited from consideration of processes of enchainment. Lopiparo and Hendon (2009), for example, interpreted figurine fragmentation in the Ulúa Valley of Honduras as evidence for the circulation of fragments of wholes that represented relationships between people. The

significance of the fragments depended on participants' memories and active efforts of "recomposition" (R. Joyce 2009: 420–421). Destruction of the figurines' visual and corporeal integrity, in effect, materialized social networks.

Enchainment models are not without their critics, as I noted above (Bailey 2005: 112). Brittain and Harris (2010: 582) took pains to illustrate that fragmentation does not necessarily equal or lead to enchainment and that some arguments that have been put forth "dissolve the complexity" needed to sustain such relationships.⁴⁸ They further opined that fragmentation, in and of itself, does not necessarily imply "a dividual or relational sense of personhood." Their warnings are important to acknowledge, and, in the case of La Blanca, the strict application of an enchainment model would require archaeological data not yet available. We have not, for example, identified figurine fragments from disparate contexts that fit together, or mapped out where different parts of the same figurine wound up. Preventing this is the massive number of fragments as well as their distribution across a center that spans more than 300 ha. In spite of decades of excavation, perhaps only 0.1 percent of the total surface extent of the site has been sampled. Nevertheless, posing questions pertinent to an enchainment model or *chaîne opératoire* approach is not without merit. Gaydarska et al. (2007: 180) called on scholars to think about where the missing figurine fragments are, whether one can answer the question or not. Resolving this question at La Blanca would require nearly complete horizontal exposure, an objective few, if any, excavations can ever realize. Yet even massive lateral exposures would not reveal figurine fragments deposited off-site or at other sites altogether (Gaydarska et al. 2007: 181).

What we are left with at La Blanca is compelling evidence of persistent and repetitive practices of fragmentation, which rendered small clay representations of human bodies into their constituent parts. The data, at La Blanca and across much of Preclassic Mesoamerica, invite a variety of methodological approaches, each of which rests on recognition of the relationship between the part and the whole. It also necessitates a diachronic perspective that considers changing patterns of figurine fragmentation in relationship to mortuary practices, acts of termination and renewal, traditions of representation, and understandings of the human body.

Fragmentation beyond Figurines: Ethnohistorical and Ethnographic Evidence

The theme of bodily fragmentation persisted for millennia in Mesoamerica and played a central role in many artistic

programs and narratives recorded in post-conquest ethnohistorical documents. Its longevity is, in my opinion, an excellent indicator of its social utility in any number of contexts. All evidence suggests that references to bodily fragmentation in Mesoamerica were reinvented as historical circumstances changed throughout time and space. Yet exploration of much later examples of fragmentation affords two things. For one, later images and narratives underscore the threads of continuity through time while also highlighting the ways in which fragmentation was reenvisioned and repurposed. Second, and perhaps even more significantly, they explicitly confirm that understandings of the human body as divisible persisted for many, many centuries. In fact, as I argue below, broadly shared and long-lived Preclassic figurine practices, founded on understandings of the human body as divisible, may well have paved the way for later understandings of the human form and its partibility. My discussion of later material, admittedly, moves far afield from Preclassic fragmentation, but it is necessary for establishing the duration and legacies of these practices.

Themes of decapitation and dismemberment repeat throughout Sahagún's Florentine Codex, often in conjunction with calendrical rituals. During the second month of the calendar, in honor of the deity Xipe Totec, a sacrificial victim was rolled down the steps of a pyramid and, once the body had come to rest, ritual practitioners "laid hold of it and carried it to their *capulco*, where they dismembered it and divided it up" (Sahagún 1950–1982: bk. 2: 3). A similar trope of bodily fragmentation reverberates in the story of the goddess Coyolxauhqui, whose dismemberment was critical to the mythic history of the Aztec people and memorialized in monumental sculptural form at the foot of the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan (Matos Moctezuma 1987). The goddess's bodily partibility is emphasized in the composition through the fleshy, serrated edges of severed flesh that mark her arms, legs, and neck. Other ceremonies described by Sahagún involved the use of bones taken from sacrificial victims or captives. In one memorable example, the thigh bone of a deceased captive was taken, wrapped in paper, and provided with a mask. This object was referred to as a "god-captive" and its creation was celebrated with a feast that included the friends and kin of the victim's captor (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 2: 60).⁴⁹

Aztec rulers also participated in symbolic acts of divine dismemberment, some of which eloquently underscore the symbiotic relationship between representation and fragmentation. In a ritual held in honor of Huitzilopochtli, the god's body was fashioned out of amaranth dough. After a ritual death in the presence of the king, the dough body of the deity was broken

apart. His heart was presented to the ruler, while “the rest of his members, which were made as it were, to be his bones, they were distributed and divided up” among various members of the Aztec ruling body (Sahagún 1950–1982: bk. 3: 5–6).⁵⁰

Dismemberment also served divinatory purposes. According to Sahagún (1950–1982: bk. 4: 101), commoner women born on the day 1 Wind, which carried a negative augury, were said to be possessed and “could enchant by taking apart or disarticulating the bones of the foot, etc.” Eduard Seler (1998, vol. 2: 46) called attention to the Florentine Codex’s description of ritual practitioners known as *motetequi* who cut themselves up, dislocated their joints, and then, having covered their “mangled members” with a cloth, began to sprout new body parts. Characters such as this may be presaged by the *wahy* characters on Classic Maya polychrome vessels, one of whom bears a nominal phrase read as “self-chopper,” and who is portrayed hacking away at his own head with an axe (Grube and Nahm 1994: 708; David Stuart, personal communication, 2018).

The Spanish clergymen who arrived in the New World at the beginning of the sixteenth century and documented many of these ceremonies and beliefs were steeped in their own distinctly European understandings of the significance of bodily fragmentation. Recognizing that their reports were crafted within a colonial matrix fueled by traditions on both sides of the Atlantic is crucial, as is exploring the European belief systems with which Spanish chroniclers were engaged. While this European lens had no impact on Preclassic representations and practices, of course, it certainly did – and continues to – impact the ways we, today, situate the patterns of continuity and rupture between the more ancient Mesoamerican past, the colonial period, and the modern present.

Caroline Walker Bynum eloquently articulated how a tension between whole and fragmentary bodies, particularly those of Christ and the saints, became a subject of intense liturgical debate by the twelfth century in Europe. A number of medieval stories repeat the refrain that intact bodies are better ready for the sound of the trumpet at resurrection time than dismembered ones (Bynum 1991: 269).⁵¹ However, such beliefs were in direct opposition to themes of bodily division equally fundamental to the Christian cult of relics and to burial practices of the nobility, whose dismemberment on death enabled them to be interred in multiple locations near different saints’ remains (Bynum 1991: 270; also see Sawday 1995: 99). Bynum noted that during the fourteenth century holy bones were even occasionally worn by the pious to signify devotion or displayed in reliquaries that mimicked the shape of the individual body part. Lindquist (2008: 23)

suggested that the desire by some important medieval patrons to designate their bodies for interment in different places enabled them to “signal loyalty to more than one institution, city, or region, and also to gain from the prayers of a greater number of religious from different institutions.” Lindquist’s observations are significant, as they align religious beliefs with political goals and account for the ability of fragmented individuals to spread their allegiances and “symbolically at least, to be in two places at the same time.”

In medieval and Renaissance Europe, notions of bodily partition were rife with inconsistency and paradoxical at best (Bynum 1991: 272, 276, 280). Tensions were further exacerbated by new practices such as medical dissection, which gained momentum in the fourteenth century. Because these early medical practices often relied on the cadavers of executed prisoners, a close association between dissection and morality or state-sanctioned punishment developed (Sawday 1995: 78–80).

Dismemberment hovered at the center of debates concerning resurrection of the body well into the sixteenth century, and monks and friars in the New World were undoubtedly familiar with such deliberations. They were also, quite likely, familiar with visual treatises on the subject of bodily divisibility. The resurrection scene in Luca Signorelli’s *The Last Judgment*, painted in the San Brizio Chapel in Orvieto Cathedral between 1499 and 1504, for example, illustrates the reassemblage of fragmented bodies as a testament to their piety (Bynum 1991: 285). The work vividly summons words attributed to the fourth-century martyr James the Dismembered, who believed his virtue would prevent his remains from succumbing to decay even if fragmented:

Go, third toe, to thy companions, and as the grain of wheat bears much fruit, so shalt thou rest with thy fellows unto the last day.... Be comforted, little toe, because great and small shall have the same resurrection. A hair of the head shall not perish, and how much less shalt thou, the least of all, be separated from thy fellows? (Bynum 1991: 294)⁵²

For the pious, according to Bynum (1991: 194), God’s promise was that bodily division would be overcome. Although eternal fragmentation lay in wait for the damned, it was not so for the religious, saints, and nobility: for them, fragmented parts were pieces of a whole, which would be reassimilated on resurrection.

Post-conquest accounts of fragmentation in the New World were resonant with concepts drawn from the ancient Mesoamerican past, but they must just as readily be viewed in light of the fraught relationship to dismemberment that characterized medieval and Renaissance

Europe. The embattled place of dismemberment in early Christian theology further reminds us that in Mesoamerica, too, the trope of fragmentation was likely fluid and multivocal. On both sides of the ocean, concepts of bodily fragmentation were laden with religious significance and sociopolitical import, and framed within debates concerning moral and social order. To acknowledge these European dynamics by no means denigrates or denies the antiquity and integrity of ancient Mesoamerican belief systems, which also embraced fragmentation as a central trope. Rather, it situates colonial accounts and more recent ethnographic evidence as part of a continuum of beliefs and debates stemming from more than one continent and any single religious or philosophical system.

Some contemporary rituals in Mesoamerican indigenous communities are still predicated on notions of fragmentation. Alan Sandstrom and Pamela Sandstrom described the making of cut-out paper figures in Nahua, Otomí, and Tepehua communities in curing and fertility rituals. Their fabrication involved the breaking of a divine whole “into manageable segments in order to restore harmony and balance between humans and the powers in the universe” (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986: 277–278). The process, like the divine whole itself, accommodated the creation of an infinite number of figures (Monaghan 2000: 27).

Stories of bodily fragmentation are also documented ethnographically among the modern Maya of Guatemala. A story about the Mam, a venerated character probably related to the ancient Maya deity God L, involves dismemberment. The Mam is the patron of ritual practitioners in Santiago Atitlán and believed to be vital to cycles of renewal in spite of his dangerous and destructive tendencies. Christenson (2001: 181) described an encounter between Francisco Sojuel, a legendary ritual practitioner of Santiago Atitlán, and the Mam:

But the Mam soon got tired of keeping a watch over the people of the town and began to wander far away over all the mountains and all the countries without permission. He was supposed to protect the town from theft and adultery but he started to cause problems, doing whatever he wanted to do. He started to look for beautiful young girls and seduce them. But he could also appear as a beautiful woman himself and drive men crazy who followed “her.” So Francisco Sojuel cut away his head, arms, and legs to stop him from wandering everywhere and to make him more obedient. He then tied the pieces back together again with cords. That is why he is called Maximón, which means “He Who is Bound,” but his real name is Mam [Grandfather].

Christenson recognized that this story encompasses both fragmentation and reassembly and symbolizes the “instability inherent in nature which inevitably destroys what it seeks to build.” Yet, as he cautioned, the Mam should be understood not as an “evil being” but, rather, as “essential to the proper regeneration of the earth because he provides the means whereby the gods like Martín and Jesus Christ may pass through sacrificial death to be reborn to new life” (Christenson 2001: 187–190). He also added that Fray Diego López de Cogolludo (1957), writing in seventeenth-century Yucatán, noted that the Mam, in the form of a wooden idol, presided over New Year’s rites. The Mam was placed on a bench and given offerings on the first day but, by the close of the festival, the wooden pieces from which he was made were thrown to the ground. Even today the body of the Mam in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, is crafted from a framework of *palo de pito* wood bound by a tightly coiled rope. Sven Gronemeyer and Barbara MacLeod (2010: 35–36) noted that the coiling of rope around the Mam’s body constituted “the most sacred ceremony of the ritual year. It occurs on the same night as his reassembly and is part of the renewal of the world.”⁵³ Vincent Stanzione (2003: 263) concluded that the recreation of the Mam “is a performance of memory through first dismembering Mam and then remembering just how to redo what has been undone.”

Colonial documents from other regions of Mesoamerica demonstrate that notions of fragmentation extended to expressions of social and community order. Barbara Mundy (2005: 370) noted that representations of isolated body parts were used to symbolize the relationships between people and places in Mixtec “map-genealogies” that often took the form of *lienzos* (Fig. 5.14a):

Mary Elizabeth Smith has tracked down a whole set of modifiers of geographical substantives that are homonyms of words for parts of the body. . . . On the Lienzo de Zacatepec, one sign reads “Chayucu” or “at the foot of the hill,” the first element being the dialectical variant of *saba*, a word for “foot” The point of these metaphors is to express, and to help foster, the sense of closeness people feel to the land in which they live.

Mundy (2005: 375) clarified that the modifiers for the earth’s parts were taken from commoners’ vocabulary: “The elite body had its own special vocabulary – the elite’s foot, for example, was called *duhuaya*, not the *saba* of the common foot.” While elites presented their detailed dynasties in the *lienzos*, the map portion was imbued with commoner language that created “a locus of communal self-recognition” and “a metaphor that link

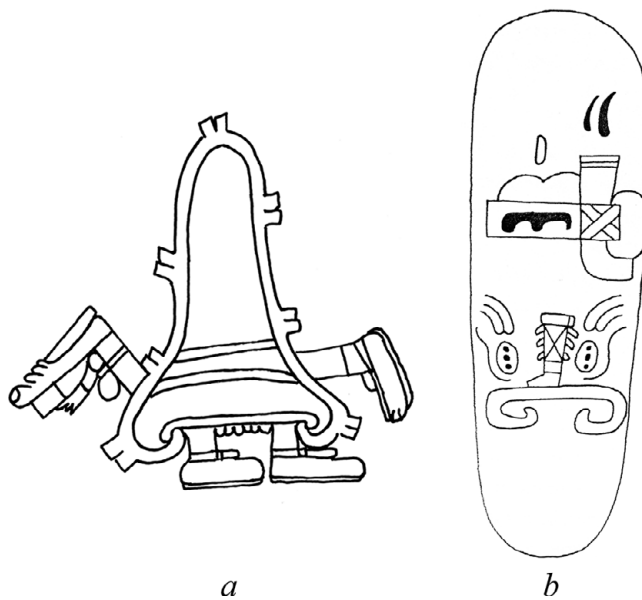


Figure 5.14 Body parts and locatives: (a) detail from the Lienzo de Zacatepec; (b) possible toponym on a Middle Preclassic incised green jadeite celt attributed to Guerrero and now in a private collection. Drawing (a) by author after Smith (1973: fig. 101); drawing (b) courtesy of Stephen Houston

[ed] the community to its territory.” Combined together in these documents, the components – drawn from both elite and non-elite spheres – became “complementary forms, as are their referents, the community and the ruling family.”⁵⁴

Monaghan (1994: 95) explained that “Mesoamerican languages commonly mark geographical and physical location, or ‘locatives,’ with terms derived from body parts.”⁵⁵ For the Mixtec people, the body became a “central metaphor for things ranging from orientation in space to social and political arrangements.” Such indigenous statements, which used a vocabulary of bodily fragmentation to assert territorial claims, may not have been utterly alien to European viewers whose own expressions of social order were equally imbued with references to bodily partibility. In many ways, allusions to bodily fragmentation may have been a sort of lingua franca, a metaphorical language that resonated with both indigenous and European audiences. But that suggestion does nothing to alter the fact that practices and understandings of fragmentation pre-dated the arrival of the Europeans by millennia. In fact, their antiquity is illustrated by a Middle Preclassic celt whose design includes an apparent toponym that consists of an inward curling sign, probably signifying “hill” or “place,” above which appears a disembodied human leg and foot (Fig. 5.14b) (Houston 2004: 284–285, fig. 10.4a; Princeton 1995: plate 127). By the time that La Venta Monument 13 (Fig. 2.12b) was carved, disembodied feet – or footprints – had already

become integral components of emergent script traditions; “liberated body parts” signified the actions and movement of people through space (R. Joyce 1998: 156).

Discussion

The Middle Preclassic jadeite celt in Figure 5.14b, an object of economic value and ritual import, illustrates the antiquity and symbolic significance of the motif of disembodied body parts. As remarkable as the imagery is, however, the trope of bodily fragmentation was more fully expressed – in geographical terms, in quantitative terms, and in terms of accessibility to the general public regardless of socioeconomic status – by ceramic figurines during the Preclassic period. Figurines, through equal processes of representation *and* fragmentation, visualized relationships between human bodies, and they did so from the very beginnings of Mesoamerican civilization.

It is not due purely to influences from Europe that disembodied body parts played a role in expressions of social order and community identity during the colonial period and continue to do so in the modern present. The conceptual foundations for these practices are readily traced back into the deep recesses of the Mesoamerican past. At Early Preclassic Etlatongo, for example, high volumes of broken figurines – disembodied body parts forged of fired clay – were used to delimit and elevate a public structure (Blomster 2009). At San Lorenzo, figurine fragments were part of a deposit placed atop the red sand-plastered floor in the elite precinct of Group E where a large throne, Monument 14, was located (Cyphers 1999: 163). At Middle Preclassic La Blanca, figurine fragments are found scattered throughout the fill of Mound 1. They were not cached with care but, instead, gathered up with other detritus from household middens, which was transported to the center of this early city.⁵⁶ There the figurines and other refuse were repurposed in the construction of the 25-m-high mound that contained 140,000 m³ of fill and would have taken approximately 50,000 person-days to build (Rosenswig 2000: table 3). On a purely functional level, the figurines, along with the other detritus, contributed to the volume of Mound 1. But on another, more conceptual one, the fragmented clay bodies and household residue of the city’s residents also contributed to Mound 1’s role as a massive symbol of the body politic.⁵⁷ Perhaps the fragmented figurines symbolized the communal labor necessary to construct Mound 1, or inspired memories of once complete wholes whose parts were scattered throughout the lived spaces of the city and beyond.

The fragments of figurines that can still be seen when walking through long-abandoned cities may have fueled

understandings by later Mesoamerican peoples of the significance of bodily representation and fragmentation. Hamann (2002: 352) wrote a thoughtful essay exploring how later peoples interpreted the material remains of older civilizations as “relics from a previous creation.” Borrowing from the work of scholars like Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Igor Kopytoff (1986) on the social life of material objects, Hamann argued that objects from the distant past in Mesoamerica were believed to possess an animate nature that made them conceptually potent to later peoples with whom they “cohabitated.” Chinchilla (2017: 64) concurred, noting that there is a “preoccupation with the fate of the peoples of earlier eras” in Mesoamerican cosmologies, who are believed to have “survived beneath the earth or hidden in wild places” often associated with abandoned archaeological sites.

I wonder, following these scholars, if the figurines that littered Preclassic communities did not inspire ways of understanding places whose residents, while long gone, left traces in the form of tiny renderings of individuals, fragmented and embedded in the ground. At a site like La Blanca, which witnessed many later reoccupations including today’s plantain and banana farmers, figurine fragments are a part of daily life: they are scattered in yards, in agricultural fields, and along the embankments of roads. Although most of the fragments are close to 3,000 years old, they are still visible, as they must have been throughout the many years since they were first used, broken, and ultimately discarded. When excavating

at La Blanca, it is not unusual to find a figurine fragment jutting out from the side wall of an excavation unit (Fig. 5.15). These fragmentary body parts are anchored to the earth and a particular place and time, not unlike an ancient footprint or other vestiges of the people who lived there long ago. Hamann argued that similar musings occupied the minds of ancient peoples who sought to make sense of the past and those who had gone before them. One cannot look at the Chayucu toponym in the Lienzo de Zacatepec (Fig. 5.14a) and deny the possibility that fragments of ancient figurines, poking up from the ground, may have inspired the pictorial sensibility of this locative. Images are, after all, part of an aesthetic domain that participates within but also exceeds the present and conventional temporalities; they are “‘compressed performances’ caught up in recursive trajectories of representation and pastiche whose dense complexity makes them resistant to any particular moment” (Pinney 2005: 266). Christopher Pinney’s ideas translate well to figurine fragments, whose potency likely endured well past the moment at which they were discarded.

The making and breaking of Preclassic figurines were persistent practices that cannot be isolated from enduring structures of belief concerning the human body and its representation in Mesoamerica. Fragmentation was often deliberate and, when intentional, meaningful, and the evidence to support these assertions is worth reiterating: (1) Preclassic figurines are broken, in many cases across their most structurally strong sections. (2) Figurine



Figure 5.15 View of La Blanca figurine fragment poking out of side wall of excavation unit and detail of figurine. Photo courtesy of the La Blanca Archaeological Project

fragments from a single context cannot be pieced back together, and fragments appear to have been dispersed. (3) Within the corpus of Mesoamerican art, bodily fragmentation is a significant and recurring theme. (4) Archaeological data from across Mesoamerica indicate a strong conceptual relationship between burials, bodily partibility, and the agency of individual body parts. (5) The hieroglyphic and ethnohistorical records attest to an interest in demarcating and emphasizing points of articulation in human bodies. (6) An array of ethnohistorical and ethnographic accounts underscores the social significance of fragmentation, which was often filtered during the colonial and later periods through belief systems that had flourished, just as vibrantly, for centuries in Europe.

Practices of bodily fragmentation were shared by all levels of Mesoamerican society from the early years of the Preclassic period onward and enacted in both public and private spaces. Such practices engaged with explorations of personhood and community visualized as a disassembly of the self that, nevertheless, was predicated on memories of a once complete human body. Fragmentation, Elsner (2003) wrote, spurs memory and what he referred to as “two-dimensional interpretation” or a thought process through which the broken state of the material points to multiple stages of its life history simultaneously. Broken material, in other words, cannot be fully apprehended without recognition of its previous iterations and contexts. Applying these ideas to the Classical world, Elsner (2000: 162, 175) characterized Late Antique Rome with its *spolia* and cult of relics as a “culture of fragments.” Tactics of fragmentation, he asserted, were inspired and sustained in numerous cultures because of the very agency they extend to viewers and participants, who join in the making of connections and interpretations.⁵⁸ Elsner viewed this agency as an “interpretive onus” that fell to those witnessing or participating in the acts. In ancient Mesoamerica, the duration and extent of practices of fragmentation suggest to me that it too was viewed as a responsibility and, even, a moral imperative. The array of evidence of all sorts suggests that the creation, discard, dispersal, and deposition of fragments was central to the maintenance of social order for thousands of years. These beliefs persisted in spite of the conquest or, just as likely, were creatively amalgamated with European concepts of fragmentation equally engaged with notions of bodily partibility and the relationship of the self to larger communities. Fragmentation was a social tool whose success hinged, in part, on its participatory nature, which required acts of remembering and interpreting on the part of individuals who were, as Elsner phrased it, compelled – for their well-being and that of the community – to “connect the dots.”

Ascertaining, for Preclassic Mesoamerica, the nature of the relationship between individuals and larger communities is fraught with difficulty; the best we can do is aim for approximations. Equally problematic is determining what modern words one should use to describe ancient understandings of an individual’s relationship to the larger social whole. Recent scholarship offers a critique of the Western notion of the individual as a circumscribed entity with intangible possessions such as “personal space.”⁵⁹ For example, Fowler (2002: 47) argued that, in Neolithic Britain, bodies were not necessarily the “bounded locus of ‘the individual’” or a site through which difference was emphasized. Bodies instead functioned as “abstract template[s] for sameness” and repositories of an accumulation of social relationships. As I mentioned previously, Monaghan (1998, 2000: 29) suggested that, for ancient Mesoamericans, extra-bodily relationships pertain to personal identity, which “inheres in a collectivity.” Such debates concerning the boundaries of individuality and personhood do not exist only in the realm of social theory. As Duncan and Schwarz (2014: 150) discerned, “topics such as ghost pain in amputees, and the prospect of muscle memory among patients with memory problems, have highlighted the fact that aspects of personhood may be embodied to a greater degree than previously imagined in Western medicine.”

Strathern (1988) first proposed the idea of the “dividual” – as opposed to the “individual” – to describe the fragmentary nature of personhood in Melanesia. In search of some middle ground, Gillespie (2001: 75; 2008b: 131; also see Tate 1992: 17–18) advocated for a concept of personhood in Mesoamerica that is biased neither toward individual action nor social collective, but that pays heed to the complex enactment of relationships within a society. Roy Wagner (1991) offered a slightly different solution. He proposed the concept of “fractal” bodies, which, as Duncan and Schwarz (2014: 151) summarized, accounts for

persons whose bodies are actually integral, being neither separate individuals or truly corporate groups. Fractals are shapes in which the subsidiary parts have the same form as the larger whole, so zooming in or out results in seeing the same shape just on a different scale. Fowler . . . succinctly illustrated the point by describing a person’s fractal body as a potentially nested culmination of ancestors. In a single body, substances are passed on from our parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. Similar cumulative blending of genders, moieties, or entire communities within a particular person could result in other manifestations of fractal bodies. These relational bodies

are defined, and in fact inextricably chained to one another, by virtue of their relationships to other people and objects.

There were, undoubtedly, many kinds of “relational personhood” (Brittain and Harris 2010; Fowler 2010) in ancient Mesoamerica. One is wise to remember, following Duncan and Schwarz (2014: 152), that bodies are rarely uniform or stable through time. They are also political, with identities that shift in accordance with changing circumstances.

Even with these challenges, which range from the semantic to the practical, we should not lose sight of the archaeological reality of thousands of fragmentary Preclassic figurines. Their sheer abundance in such a multitude of contexts indicates that bodily fragmentation was a relational and dynamic *process* (Susan Gillespie, personal communication, 2015). Viewed as such, we can appreciate bodily fragmentation as a persistent and evolving pattern that structured Mesoamerican social thought through endlessly diverse and perpetually fluctuating historical circumstances. Settling on a single methodological framework for exploring fragmentation in Mesoamerica may, in fact, be shortsighted. Fragments are part of “connective flows” that demand consideration beyond a simple “part and whole” dichotomy (Brittain 2004; also see Fowler 2008 and Thomas 1999), and scholars should “proceed towards the work fragments do in their own right” (Brittain and Harris 2010: 589).

This chapter has attempted to do just that: illuminate “the work fragments do” in Mesoamerica by gathering evidence from the archaeological, visual, ethnographic, and ethnohistorical records. It is hardly “anecdotal,” to use the pejorative term Bailey (2017: 827) leveled against arguments that are poorly supported by data, patterns, and broader contextualization. Even if tidy answers to “why” Preclassic figurines were broken elude us, we must still recognize that breakage represents a transformative *and* communicative act. Fragmented pieces take on new meanings once no longer part of the same object. Accordingly, by viewing figurines through the lens of fragmentation, we are able to put them “in action” and understand them as potential “communication conduits” (Biehl 2006: 199).

It is equally important not to lose sight of the fact that fragmentation went hand in hand with representation in Preclassic Mesoamerica. Only when these two points are put into conversation with each other, and a range of diverse data examined, can we begin to discern that the human body was viewed as inherently partible. In arguing this, however, I do not wish to reduce Preclassic Mesoamerican personhood to one “partible” type. Brittain and

Harris (2010: 587), Fowler (2004, 2008), Gillespie (2001, 2008b), and Hendon (2012) all cautioned that many different modes of personhood existed in the past, each of which took form in unique historical and material contexts. The very fact that Preclassic figurines of all types – human, animal, supernatural, or some combination thereof – were fragmented indicates that partibility should not be reduced to a single meaning or limited to a single category of being. In my attempt to avoid colonizing the past with a new generalization (to adopt a phrase coined by Brittain and Harris 2010: 588), I have endeavored instead to situate Preclassic fragmentation as a deeply meaningful and pervasive – but also elastic and flexible – trope. I view it as key to understanding an intervisual spectrum of meanings and practices concerning bodies, people, and the significance of figural representation.

Stepping back from fragmentation, we must also recognize that the representation of the human body in ancient Mesoamerica was in and of itself a powerful act, the instantiation of a transformation from abstract idea to a representative object (Biehl 2006: 210). During the Early and Middle Preclassic periods, human representations, incomplete or whole, were rarely static and never did just one thing. They were precarious by nature, open to transformation, contestation, resignification, and destruction (Bailey 2005: 140; Butler 1993). Even if most Preclassic figurines lack “rich social biographies” (Lesure 2012: 373), they were essential to expression of what it meant to be human. And the fragmented body in Mesoamerica appears to have been every bit as potent as the intact one; fragmentation was profoundly generative, it seems, and not “the antithesis of the body as a functional tool” (Stewart 1993: 105).

Preclassic figurines afford enormous insight into the significance of human representation in Mesoamerica. They, every bit as much as monumental sculpture, were potent, labile, and well suited to visualizing social identities and relationships. The acts of targeted fragmentation so evident in the archaeological record, perhaps ironically, provide additional insight into the meanings with which representation engaged. They also attest to the time depth of these systems of meaning, many of which were conceptually sophisticated and broadly shared from the earliest centuries of Mesoamerican history.

Why then, given the rich significance of figurine making and breaking, did the tradition wane so dramatically along the south coast of Mesoamerica by the start of the Late Preclassic period? The [next chapter](#) tackles this question by exploring the ways in which strategies of human representation shifted, yet again, to give voice to new and pressing social concerns.

Changing Discourses of Human Representation in Late Preclassic Mesoamerica

This chapter shifts its focus to the Late Preclassic period, an era in ancient Mesoamerica that witnessed an extraordinary variety of artistic and sociopolitical transformations. Perhaps most visible, in the very literal sense of the term, was the explosion of art forms, many monumental, in both quantity and variety. Sculptures embraced a new set of formal goals, not the least of which was an emphasis on kingly bodies rendered in increasingly two-dimensional terms and often contextualized within mythological frameworks. These monuments emerged on the south coast from virtual obscurity; monumental sculpture had been relatively rare in this region in previous eras, localized in only a few communities. But by the Late Preclassic period it burgeoned, taking on a discernible role in many newly formulated urban centers where it celebrated the office of rulership and the actions of gods and kings.

The proliferation of new sculptural forms in cities along the south coast was accompanied by a marked attenuation of the figurine tradition that had flourished for centuries. Yet reducing these dynamics to a simple cause and effect relationship, or casting them as inevitable consequences, would be disingenuous. To wit, not all regions of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica abandoned the production of figurines, although many witnessed the same explosion of monumental figural sculpture.¹ The opposite is also true. In regions where the figurine tradition did decline, an uptick in monumental figural sculpture was not an inexorable consequence. No one formula accounts for the multiple ways in which traditions of human figuration, in clay and stone, evolved alongside the new sociopolitical realities of the Late Preclassic period. Although this chapter emphasizes the south coast and its own unique situation, it takes into consideration other regions and alternative trajectories in an attempt to better understand the roles that

enduring human representations played in processes of social and political negotiation in Late Preclassic Mesoamerica.

Social Dynamics and Semantics

One of the most significant transformations of the Late Preclassic period was the advent of state formation. Archaeologists have convincingly argued that the transition from the Middle to the Late Preclassic period along the Pacific slope of Mesoamerica witnessed the formation of states with increasingly centralized political and economic systems.² In spite of the fact that few would dispute that these sociopolitical changes transpired, some would take issue with the terms we use to describe them. Designations like “state” or “state formation” are, admittedly, imprecise and do little to communicate the specific historical circumstances that fueled their development. Adam Smith (2003: 95) went so far as to suggest that we abandon the concept of “state” because of its “denotational insecurity.” He offered in its place, as Simon Martin (2016: 250) recounted, “the ‘early complex polity,’ an entity concentrated on a governing authority formed through mutually sustaining relations of power and legitimation.” Other scholars, such as Yoffee (2005: 1), advised we keep the term “state” in spite of its flaws “as long as we explain clearly what we mean, and as long as our categories further research, rather than force data into analytical blocks that are self-fulfilling prophecies.”³ My use of the term is predicated on the existence of a suite of archaeologically attested data, summarized by Love (2007: 295), which includes evidence of a growing gap between elites and non-elites, an increase in centralized production and exchange that undercut household autonomy, an increase in political centralization, evidence of the control of surplus by elite households, and the curtailment of certain forms of household ritual in favor of more public ceremonies situated in the political and administrative core of these new centers.

Monumental art, I suggest, played a key role in the growing spectacle of public ritual and in the convoluted equation of state formation along the south coast, lending tangible form to assertions of sociopolitical legitimacy and forging some of the “central symbols” of society (Yoffee 2005: 17). It also played a crucial role in defining the contours of many Late Preclassic cities. Cities were urban not only as the result of processes of aggregation, marked population growth, or the development of increasing socioeconomic complexity, although these

forces were all significant (Love and Rosenswig n.d.). They were urban because they created new social realities (Yoffee 2005). Monumental art, especially sculpture featuring the actions of ruling elites, became a vital part of these new Late Preclassic social realities on the south coast.

But this is still an overly simplified story line. If I expand my story to include any and all durable figural traditions, in keeping with the previous chapters and goals of this book, it quickly becomes far more complicated and, as a result, much more interesting. At sites like Izapa, the explosion of monumental figural sculpture featuring the bodies and deeds of kings coincided with a waning figurine tradition. The two phenomena were not companions by mere chance: evidence suggests that elite bodies of stone became a representational focus at the expense of smaller, ceramic depictions of a more diverse cross-section of society. Yet at nearby El Ujuxte, which also experienced a marked decrease in figurine use, its leaders eschewed carved monuments in favor of architectural statements of authority and a city plan that was rigid and grid-like. The figurine cessation at El Ujuxte was not paralleled by an upsurge in the deployment of monumental figural sculpture, in other words, but by a new attention to disciplined urban spaces. In the adjacent Guatemalan Highlands, yet another scenario unfolded. Rulers there, as at Izapa, embraced the communicative possibilities of monumental figural sculpture featuring elite actors. But figurines continued to be used throughout the Late Preclassic period although, arguably, with a more restrained cast of characters than in previous eras.

Put simply, there is no single story line for Late Preclassic figuration. Nor was there a simple cause and effect relationship between increased urbanism, state formation, monumental sculpture enlisted in its service, and figurine use. The path that I follow to elucidate these points is a circuitous one. I begin by introducing the new forms of sculpture that emerged along the south coast during the Late Preclassic period before presenting the

archaeological evidence for figurine use, or a lack thereof, at this juncture in time. From there I turn to a more conceptual exploration of the significance of changing patterns of figuration in southeastern Mesoamerica, emphasizing how a focus on only one body of data – such as stone sculpture, to the exclusion of ceramic figurines – inhibits our ability to understand the broader implications of figuration and its significance to Late Preclassic discourses of political authority. This chapter focuses on only a slice of the much larger story of human representation in Late Preclassic Mesoamerica. But the story it tells and the questions it asks are new.

Kings and Gods in Stone

In order to contextualize my discussion, I begin with what I consider to be the hallmark of Late Preclassic monumental sculpture in southeastern Mesoamerica: carved stelae that feature narrative compositions extolling the nature of kings and kingship. These monuments were the avant-garde art of their day; they challenged the aesthetic boundaries of stone sculpture, established new visual horizons, and became central to the messaging of some of the most powerful urban centers along the south coast. On the Late Preclassic Pacific slope of Guatemala and Mexico and in the adjacent Guatemalan Highlands, stelae – the tall, upright stones whose surfaces are often carved – were frequently paired with altars and accompanied in site centers by potbelly monuments, thrones, boulder sculptures, pedestal sculptures, fountain stones, carved aquatic drains, silhouette sculptures, mushroom stones, and bench figurines, as well as many plain, or only minimally modified, monuments (Henderson 2013; Love 2010; Miles 1965; Parsons 1986). Chapter 7 addresses in detail the rich formal and iconographic variability in which carved stelae were just one of many expressive nodes in the matrix of Late Preclassic figuration, much of which was orchestrated in conjunction with the built environment (Fig. 6.1).



Figure 6.1 Panoramic view of Izapa Group A. Individual stone monuments, obscured by modern structures designed to protect them, define the contours of the plaza and stand at the base of pyramidal mounds covered with vegetation. Photo by author

Late Preclassic carved stelae owe a number of formal and iconographic debts to their Early and Middle Preclassic forebears but also depart from them in innovative ways. They typically focus on kingly bodies or mythic scenes portraying rulers, deities, or supernatural creatures envisioned in anthropomorphic form. Even those that feature a single personage allude to action or narrative of some sort; their compositions are rarely static, the figures rarely stoic. On Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 11, for example, the protagonist – a historical ruler or, perhaps, a prototypical king (a question to which I return in the [following chapter](#)) – engages in dynamic movement, with one foot in front of the other and arms extended and wielding ritual implements ([Fig. 6.2a](#)).⁴ The censers on either side of his feet, from which curling volutes of smoke ascend, imply that we are witnessing a performance, one that captures a moment in time but that also, through its recording in stone, renders it timeless. The ruler is garbed in an extraordinary avian costume replete with a towering bird headdress that includes an impressive hooked beak. Descending from the upper register of the monument is a second avian figure, a supernatural being known as the Principal Bird Deity that figures prominently in Mesoamerican creation accounts and was featured repeatedly in narratives of political authority from the Late Preclassic period through the time of the conquest.

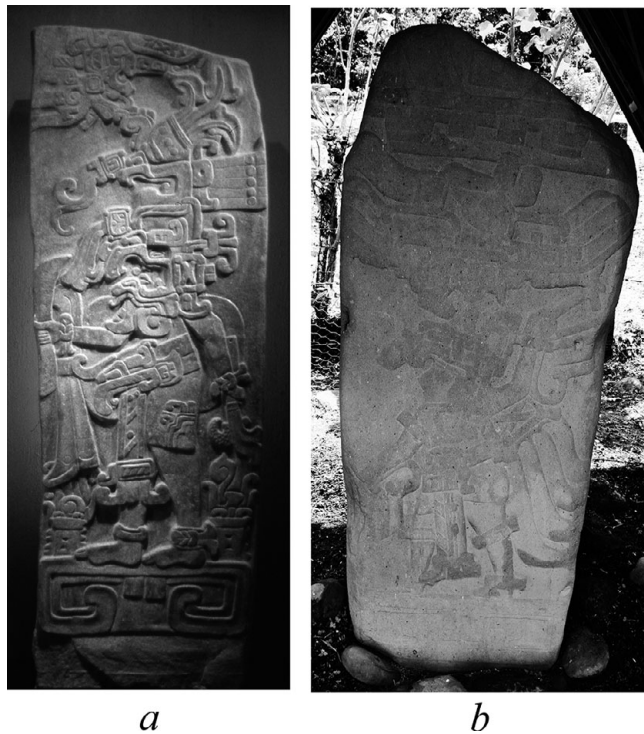


Figure 6.2 Bird-costumed performances: (a) Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 11; (b) Izapa Stela 4. Photos by Michael Love

The strikingly similar scene of Izapa Stela 4 ([Fig. 6.2b](#)), which depicts another bird-costumed ruler anchored to the baseline of the composition while an avian creature descends from above, speaks to the thematic continuity in the corpus of Late Preclassic art. Many scholars have analyzed in detail these narratives involving the Principal Bird Deity.⁵ I argued that such scenes illustrate the supernatural claims of rulers to communicate with and literally manifest supernatural beings like the mythic bird; these claims, in turn, justified their political authority. Such imagery was an integral part of Late Preclassic political rhetoric and appears at a number of sites across Mesoamerica ([Guernsey 2006b: 92–93](#)).⁶

Coe (1989) discerned that Late Preclassic stories concerning the Principal Bird Deity did more than recount mythological tales or insinuate analogies between rulers and divine beings. They established a discourse for divinely sanctioned rulership and provided a blueprint for the actions and proper comportment of kings. These avian performances were not relegated purely to surfaces of stone during the Late Preclassic period, however, but likely unfolded in plazas, enacted by rulers before audiences gathered in those spacious venues ([Fig. 6.1](#)) ([Guernsey 2006b, n.d.](#); [Guernsey Kappelman 2001, 2004](#)). The imagery on the monuments would have reflected the performances of rulers, and the rulers' performances would have mirrored back the imagery. Determining which came first – the imagery or the performances – may be impossible to ever know with certainty, and I fear that consideration of the question devolves quickly into a chicken and egg debate. What matters, however, is the role that each played within the larger conceptual equation: elite bodies, performances, and representations mirrored each other, contributing to the production of an echo chamber in which elite proclamations, both ephemeral and carved in stone, reverberated.⁷ Monuments like those at Izapa, Kaminaljuyu, and elsewhere became potent vehicles through which the language of high culture, civilized behavior, and divinely sanctioned protocol were visualized. Much as Claude Baudéz (2000: 135) asserted for Classic-period monuments, Late Preclassic stelae presented the king as “the man *par excellence*, the representative and quintessence of his community and of all the men that compose it.”

Other monuments at Izapa focus on the acts of deities, most frequently rendered in anthropomorphic form. Izapa Stela 1, for example, features a Late Preclassic deity engaged in rain-making and fishing whose iconographic attributes presage later Classic-period rain and lightning gods ([Fig. 6.3](#)) (Coe 1962: 99; 1978; Girard 1966: 40; [Guernsey 2010a: 209–211](#); [Hellmuth 1987](#); [Henderson 2013: 281–332](#); [Miles 1965: 252](#); [Norman](#)



Figure 6.3 Marion Stirling posing beside Izapa Stela 1 and Altar 2. Photo by Richard Stewart, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives

1976: 87–92; Taube 1992: 22). The imagery of Stela 1 was not concerned only with the supernatural world, however. It functioned in tandem with a series of other monuments that featured the ruler as the individual responsible for engaging with the gods, facilitating the arrival of rain, managing its control within the built environment, and ensuring agricultural abundance and economic well-being (Guernsey 2010a, 2016).⁸ To view a monument like this only at face value – a depiction of a god, performing supernaturally charged acts – is to miss its contextual implications. Images like this were part of sophisticated urban programming whose primary message concerned rulers, their interactions with the gods, and the sociopolitical and economic implications of these interventions.

Still other stelae portray innovative messages concerned with territorial control and assertions of military prowess. Izapa Stela 21 (Fig. 6.4) portrays a vivid scene of warfare and captive sacrifice in which the protagonist, garbed in impressive regalia, clasps a blade in one hand and, in the other, the severed head of his victim. The

equally fine accoutrement worn by the victim implies that the two were relative social peers. Other contemporaneous monuments, such as El Jobo Stela 1 (Fig. 5.9), depict subjugated individuals, in this case also beheaded. Monuments like Izapa Stela 21 and El Jobo Stela 1 ushered in a new focus on overt statements of deference or fealty that deftly incorporated the theme of bodily dismemberment (Guernsey 2018).⁹ The trope of bodily fragmentation in Late Preclassic art also extended to mythological scenes, further integrating the narrative domains of kings and gods. On Izapa Stela 25, an act of bodily fragmentation is phrased as part of the mythic saga of the Principal Bird Deity who, as described centuries later in the text of the Popol Vuh (Christenson 2003: 97), swooped down to tear off the arm of one of the Hero Twins (Norman 1973: plates 41 and 42). On Stela 25, the consequences of this event are implied via the missing, bleeding left arm of the twin (Lowe et al. 1982: 297; Norman 1976: 132). On this monument, as well as Izapa Stela 21, mutilation is generative, phrased as part of a system of social order maintained by gods and rulers.¹⁰

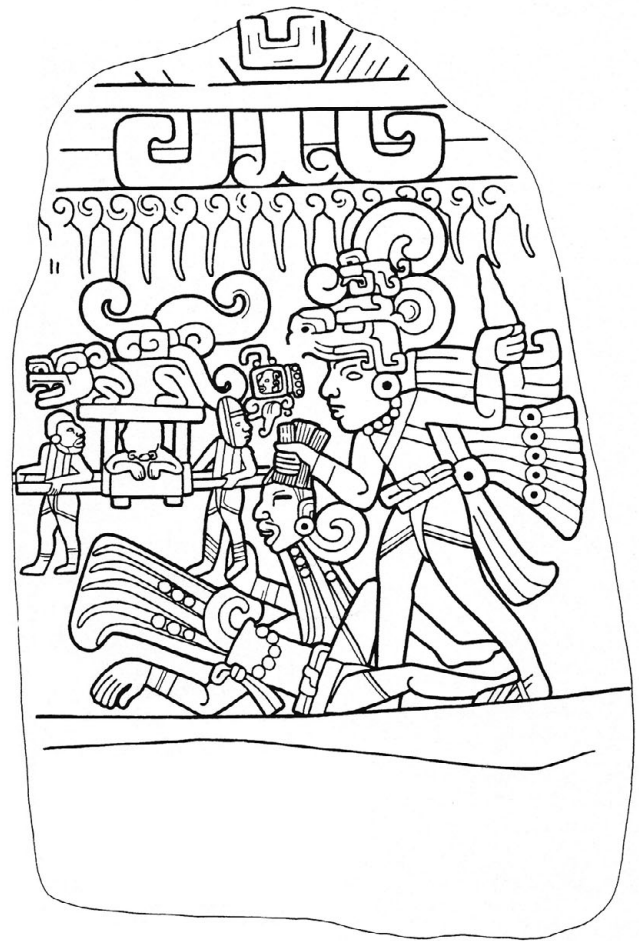
By at least the first century AD along the south coast we also begin to see the use of hieroglyphic texts to buttress assertions of authority. Some of the earliest texts carved on stelae are featured adjacent to the bodies of ruling elites as on Takalik Abaj Stela 5 (Fig. 6.5) and El Baúl Stela 1 (Fig. 6.6). Stephanie Strauss and I (Guernsey and Strauss n.d.) argued that this new Late Preclassic focus on kingly bodies framed by hieroglyphic texts and calendrical statements was part of a growing emphasis on the expression of technologies of time and other forms of specialized knowledge, including writing, which were employed in the service of kings (also see Justeson 1986: 445).

As even this brief accounting of the range of imagery indicates, ruling elites in southeastern Mesoamerica took full advantage of carved stelae to communicate the nature and extent of their power. Yet it would be presumptuous to suggest that we can ever know with any certainty exactly when – or how, or where – Late Preclassic elites first came to recognize, so astutely, sculpture's ability to lend tangible form to diverse sociopolitical messaging within the urban environment. To be sure, these traditions did not emerge from a vacuum: they were, in many ways, greatly indebted to Early and Middle Preclassic sculpture traditions. But they also expanded the world of possibilities, utilizing increasingly two-dimensional surfaces perfectly suited for narrative *and* text to feature the bodies and actions of gods and kings.

Crediting only elites with these Late Preclassic innovations, however, runs the risk of assigning “perfect knowledge and unfettered self-centered intentions” to a



a



b

Figure 6.4 Izapa Stela 21. Photo (a) by Michael Love; drawing (b) courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation

specific class of individuals (R. Joyce and Lopiparo 2005: 367). A more measured assessment would be that these art programs, which are premised on understandings of the social significance of human representation, were born out of centuries of figural production and conceptual exploration by actors from many segments of society. Notwithstanding this, we are left with the fact that the majority of Late Preclassic figural art was monumental and carved of stone and, by nature, an elite prerogative. It operated within a visual world that differed markedly from previous eras in which accessibility to human representations – especially in the form of ceramic figurines – had united people from across the socioeconomic spectrum. Given the marked diminution of the figurine tradition along the south coast during the Late Preclassic period, one might go so far as to say that bodies carved from stone flourished at the expense of other long-lived figural traditions. Stone monuments capitalized on ideas with enormous time depth and significance to all

members of society: the arrival of rain, agricultural fertility, supernatural communication, and so on. But they were nevertheless tailored to suit the needs of emerging elites by privileging *their* bodies and defining *them* as the prerequisite for, and example par excellence of, social order. The carved bodies of rulers, like those of gods, became more visible, more dynamic, more durable, and more linked to mythic passages and burgeoning writing traditions than those of others.

This remarkable transformation can only be appreciated fully, however, if one takes a step back from the impressive array of Late Preclassic stone monuments with their persistent interest in the bodies of rulers and gods. They demand to be situated as the legacy of earlier representational traditions that were *both* large and small and formulated in *both* stone and clay. The archaeological record makes abundantly clear that, throughout the Early and Middle Preclassic periods, people from diverse walks of life, at many different sites and in many different

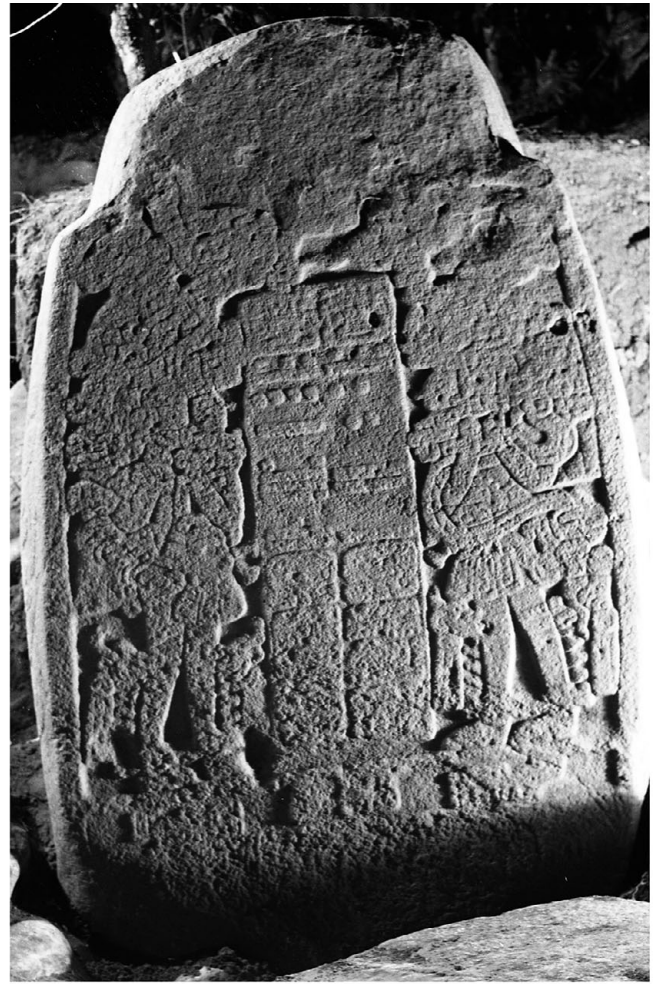
*a**b*

Figure 6.5 Takalik Abaj Stela 5: (a) oblique view; (b) view of monument shortly after excavation. Photo (a) by author; photo (b) courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project

regions, took advantage of figural representations in the form of ceramic figurines. Figurines were key players within the larger arena of human representation during this era. Monumental stone representations were, by contrast, rare and located at only a handful of centers or, every now and then, inscribed on cliff faces along paths of trade and exchange. Ceramic figurines were the vehicle through which human representation became most pervasive, the means through which meditations on acts of human representation and their social significance were most fully incorporated into the paths and fabric of daily life. Late Preclassic monumental art's success in fully exploiting the social significance of human representation owes as much a debt to understandings derived from the world of figurines as it does the world of sculpture, in my opinion.

It is difficult to understand why the vibrant ceramic figurine traditions of the Early and Middle Preclassic periods waned so dramatically at the cusp of the Late

Preclassic period in southeastern Mesoamerica. But reflecting on this situation, I maintain, enables us to more fully appreciate the implications of human representation in Late Preclassic Mesoamerica. Admittedly, the dynamics that I focus on in this chapter pertain to the south coast and do not necessarily extend to adjacent regions. However, even if my investigation and conclusions are geographically circumscribed, the lines of inquiry that I pursue can be productively applied to adjacent and even more distant geographic realms. These lines of inquiry include a consideration of who possessed the privilege to craft human representations, whose body was featured, what medium was used, and where the objects were utilized. In asking these questions, I hope to illuminate the complicated relationships between figural representations, increasingly centralized political institutions, and the new urban environments that characterized the Late Preclassic period.



Figure 6.6 El Baúl Stela 1. Photo by Michael Love

Before turning to a more sustained consideration of the corpus of Late Preclassic art in [Chapter 7](#), I explore the cessation of the figurine tradition along the south coast and contrast it with other regions of Mesoamerica that witnessed a very different course of events. The differences between regions, even within the same general span of time, reveal the novel ways in which figural traditions were envisioned, fueled, repressed, appropriated, and manipulated throughout the course of Mesoamerican history.

Late Preclassic Figurine Cessations and Continuities

[Chapter 4](#) described the extraordinary prevalence and diversity of figurines at Middle Preclassic La Blanca. Statistics are even more candid. When figurines are measured against ceramic vessels at La Blanca, the ratio is one figurine fragment for every five rim sherds (Love 2002a: 227). However, at El Ujuxte, which filled the power vacuum following La Blanca's decline and dominated

the western Pacific coastal plain of Guatemala throughout the Late Preclassic period, this ratio changed dramatically, dropping to one figurine fragment for every 2,500 rim sherds (Love 2002a: 227). Love's (2007: 295) data indicate that figurine usage in households at El Ujuxte was quite limited by c. 500 BC, at which time a marked increase in public rituals, focused in the central plazas, emerged (Love 1998, 1991). Although carved sculpture is not known from El Ujuxte, three uncarved altars, Monuments 1–3, were placed at the base of Mound 2 along one of the main axes of the urban center. Two offerings, one associated with Monument 1 and the other deposited near the intersection of the two central axes of the site, contained vessels and ceramic crosses whose shape mirrored the axial plan of El Ujuxte's civic design (Guernsey and Love 2005; Love and Balcárcel 2000: 65).

Frederick Bove (1993: 185; 2005: 102) documented a similar dearth of figurines at numerous Late Preclassic centers in Escuintla, Guatemala. At the site of Balberta, which gathered momentum toward the end of the Late Preclassic period, only three figurine fragments per 1,000 rim sherds were found.¹¹ At Izapa, to the west across the border with modern Mexico, Ekholm (1989: 33) noted that, during the Middle Preclassic Escalón (650–450 BC) and Frontera phases (450–300 BC), figurines were common in various parts of the polity. This tapered off during the following Guillén (300–100 BC) and Hato phases (100 BC–AD 100), which correspond to the period during which the extensive corpus of stone monuments at Izapa were most likely carved (Lowe et al. 1982: 23, 133; Mendelsohn 2018; Rosenswig and Guernsey 2018; Rosenswig et al. 2018).¹²

A similar figurine cessation characterized the Maya Lowlands during the Late Preclassic period. William Ringle (1999: 190–193 n. 6) linked this phenomenon to an increase in more permanent domestic structures and more formally arranged, monumental architectural construction. At Altar de Sacrificios, Willey (1972: 8) concluded that most figurines pertained to the Middle Preclassic period, although he conceded that it was “possible that handmodeled figurines continued at Altar in small quantity, throughout the later Preclassic; but this interpretation should be viewed with caution.” Figurines were also absent from Uaxactun and uncommon at Barton Creek by the Late Preclassic period (Willey 1972: 13). At the site of El Mirador, most of the handful of figurines reported from there came from mixed Middle to Late Preclassic contexts, making their exact temporal assignation difficult to establish (Hansen 1990; Ringle 1999). Nevertheless, Clark et al. (2000) stated unequivocally that the elaboration and use of figurines ended or diminished drastically in the El Mirador region during the

Late Preclassic period. They linked the diminution of the figurine tradition to the formalization of religious beliefs on the part of local elites and the establishment of early states. Perhaps, they suggested, new leaders discouraged the use of traditional objects like figurines in order to control ritual activities.

Summarizing the situation in the Maya Lowlands, Halperin (2014: 6–7) concluded that figurines were

no longer produced, or greatly diminish in importance, during the Late Preclassic period (ca. 300 BCE–300 CE), a period in which many centers became more urbanized, huge amounts of labor were devoted to the construction of monumental architecture, and state structures crystallized in form. . . . Likewise, during the Early Classic period (ca. 300–600 CE), ceramic figurines continued to be a relatively rare component of archaeological assemblages.¹³

The Playa de los Muertos figurine tradition of Honduras also faded away during the early part of the Late Preclassic period, or sometime between 400 and 100 BC according to Joyce (1993: 258; 2003: 249). A general diminution in figurine use is likewise attested in some areas of the central Mexican highlands. At the site of Tetimpa, Puebla, Patricia Plunket and Gabriela Uruñuela (1998: 304–305) documented a robust tradition of small, modeled human figurines during the Early Tetimpa phase (700–200 BC), which gave way during the Late Tetimpa phase to a new ritual repertoire focused on patio shrines. At La Laguna in Tlaxcala, figurine traditions that had initially characterized that community beginning in 900 BC were in “steep decline” by the time of the site’s abandonment by 400 BC (Lesure 2015: 115).

Different scenarios played out in other parts of Central Mexico. In Morelos, Grove (2007: 21) viewed the years following 500 BC as a period of restructuring. Chalcatzingo was abandoned, as was a tradition of monumental sculpture in the region. But Chupicuaro-like H type figurines (Vaillant 1931: 261–264) continued to appear with some regularity in archaeological assemblages into the Late Preclassic period. By contrast, figurine traditions at nearby Yautepec, which had shared particularly strong affinities with Chalcatzingo during the Middle Preclassic period, waned during the Late Preclassic period, although Smith and Montiel (2008: 249) assigned some figurines there to the latter part of the Late Preclassic based on their resemblance to Tzacualli phase figurines at Teotihuacan.¹⁴ In Puebla, at Cuauhtinchan Viejo, Ann Seiferle-Valencia (2007: 117) noted that the vast majority of figurines (68 percent of the 1,386 specimens) dated to the Middle Preclassic, but attributed 213 (28 percent) to the Late Preclassic period and five more

(0.7 percent) to the Early Classic.¹⁵ However, as she qualified, most figurines came from archaeological fill, and so chronological analysis was based on their stratigraphic distribution in this context.

The Gulf Coast region likewise reveals considerable variability. At Tres Zapotes, figurine use appears to have persevered into the Late Preclassic period, although, according to Pool (2017: 259–260), the objects themselves underwent stylistic changes. So, too, in the Huasteca region at Loma Real, figurines were produced throughout the Late Preclassic period (Marchegay 2014).¹⁶ In contrast, Miriam Gallegos Gómora (2009: 1051; also see Tway 2004: 14) described a “hiatus” in figurine production by the Late Franco 550/500–350 BC phase in Tabasco, which lasted until the Classic period when a new tradition of mold-made figurines emerged at sites like Comalcalco and Jonuta.

Data from the Guatemalan Highlands underscore the challenges of formulating any tidy summary of the nature of figurine use during the Preclassic. Assessing the situation at Kaminaljuyu – now almost completely covered by the modern spread of Guatemala City – is especially difficult, and a number of scholars have reached contradictory conclusions concerning the relative densities of figurines during the Late Preclassic period. Although Ronald Wetherington (1978: 310) attributed fifty-four of the 136 figurine fragments from reliable archaeological contexts to the Middle Preclassic Las Charcas phase, he assigned thirty-nine to the transitional Middle to Late Preclassic Verbena phase, fourteen to the ensuing Arenal phase, and sixteen to the following phase. In excavations undertaken in conjunction with the Kaminaljuyu/San Jorge project, Popenoe de Hatch (1997: 151) assigned the majority of figurines to the Late Preclassic period but warned readers that her conclusions were not based on a detailed analysis of their styles or frequencies relative to the pottery. Of the 284 figurine fragments encountered during excavations directed by Kuniaki Ohi (1994: 326), those with secure archaeological contexts were dated to the “Kaminaljuyu II” period; others encountered in architectural fill mixed with materials from earlier periods were tentatively assigned to a “Kaminaljuyu III” period. Most recently, Javier Estrada de la Cerda (2017: 40) documented more than 100 “intentionally fragmented” figurines in a tomb at the base of Mound E-III-3, which he dated to c. 200 BC. Tombs I and II in Mound E-III-3, excavated previously by Shook and Kidder (1952), lacked figurines altogether.¹⁷

Linares (2010: 32), in her summary of the data reported by various projects at Kaminaljuyu, concluded that the diversity apparent in assemblages of Late Preclassic Verbena phase figurines gave way in the ensuing Santa

Clara phase (AD 100–200) to an apparent hiatus in the fabrication of figurines. Yet ongoing excavations, like those by Estrada de la Cerda, suggest otherwise. Arroyo (2012: 203) reported that 183 figurine fragments had been recovered during the 2011 excavation season at Kaminaljuyu from contexts that included middens and construction fill spanning a wide temporal span. Gloria Ajú Álvarez and colleagues (2015: 281) described figurines amid a deposit at the base of Mound C-II-12, which they dated to the final years of the Late Preclassic period. So too Henry Rodríguez Ortiz (2017: 71) reported a large quantity of fragmented figurines ritually cached toward the close of the Late Preclassic period along with thousands of pieces of Monte Alto Rojo vessels and other objects of obsidian and stone in a domestic zone in the southwest quadrant of the city. Bárbara Arroyo (personal communication, August 2017) confirmed, in fact, that more recent excavations indicate that figurines appear to have been very common throughout the end of the Late Preclassic period as evidenced by their presence in several dense Santa Clara phase deposits. She noted, however, that the figurines differ considerably from Middle Preclassic examples (best evidenced at nearby Naranjo), lack comparable diversity, and appear to emphasize an increased standardization of forms. Arroyo cautioned as well that her excavations, both inside the confines of the protected archaeological site and in the form of salvage operations throughout modern Guatemala City, have concentrated far less on domestic zones, which might provide more refined data.

Based on the extant information from Kaminaljuyu, especially that emerging from continuing excavations, the most judicious conclusion is that figurines continued to be utilized at Kaminaljuyu during the Late Preclassic period, although to what extent or in what contexts remains to be determined. This information, interestingly, matches that from further southeast in El Salvador at the site of Santa Leticia, whose sculptural assemblage suggests connections to Kaminaljuyu throughout the Preclassic period. Figurine traditions there persisted during “the Chul phase and the initial part of the Caynac, ranging from ca. 500 BC to AD 0” (uncalibrated) according to Arthur Demarest (1986: 219). Payson Sheets and Bruce Dahlin (1978: 171) similarly assigned some figurines at Chalchuapa to the Late Preclassic period, although they noted that, at this time, “figurine manufacture in general was in decline.”

Evidence from Oaxaca complicates the situation even further and confirms the presence of divergent patterns of figurine use throughout Mesoamerica during the Late Preclassic period. Marcus (1996: 287; 1998: 9; 1999: 88; 2009: 31), working in the Valley of Oaxaca, noted

that small solid figurines “decreased significantly in number after 700 BC and virtually disappeared by 200 BC” (uncalibrated). These changes were accompanied by architectural transformations at Monte Albán, including the appearance of “larger and more spectacular public buildings” that she related to the rise of the Zapotec state (Marcus 1996: 290). Marcus, as well as Blomster (2017: 293), noted that other objects appear to have taken the place of solid figurines, including effigy incense burners, urns, and elite paraphernalia concerned with the theme of ancestors. Ciria Martínez López and Marcus Winter (1994: 109, fig. 86a) described ceramic “scenes” that appeared perhaps as early as 300–100 BC and at least by AD 250 (uncalibrated). In one case, two figures, one human and the other animal, are seated on a throne or legged bench. The object alludes to an encounter of some sort, not unlike those featured on earlier stone monuments from San Lorenzo (Fig. 2.7), here miniaturized and expressed in clay.

In the Mixteca Alta at Etlatongo, Blomster (2017: 287) noted that figurines also declined in quantity and frequency by the latter part of the Middle Preclassic, with only 7 percent of the assemblage dating to that period. However, at El Carrizal, located in the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec, figurines were ubiquitous in household refuse throughout the Late Preclassic Goma and Kuak phases, a time period that, according to Winter (2007: 201–206), witnessed population increases. Late Preclassic figurine traditions in this region of Oaxaca would thrive through the first part of the Early Classic period.

Figurines also persisted throughout the Late Preclassic period in the Lower Río Verde Valley of coastal Oaxaca, where they are found in the terrace and mound fill of public ceremonial structures, elite and commoner domestic middens, and feasting contexts that primarily date to the Late and Terminal Preclassic periods (Hepp 2007: 3, 81). Hepp characterized their use during the Late Preclassic as a central component of “communal domesticity” in which village households were interconnected “in a web of ritual and sociality that serves a public social function as much as a private one” (Hepp 2007: 12, 100). Some of the figurines found in Late Preclassic contexts may be the result of heirlooming, or the curation of figurines from earlier periods (Guy Hepp, personal communication, 2016; Arthur Joyce, personal communication, 2016).¹⁸ While some figurines were likely imported from the highlands, others utilize a paste that corresponds to a type of reduction-fired grey ware that entered the coastal region only in the latter years of the Preclassic period. The evidence demonstrates that figurines continued to be used in coastal Oaxaca through the end of the Preclassic period during an era of rapid

population expansion, social development, and increasing networks of exchange.¹⁹

The site of Teotihuacan illustrates its own unique and enduring history of figurine use. Evelyn Ratray (2001: 359) noted the presence of hand-modeled figurines in Patlachique phase (100–1 BC)²⁰ communities in the northwest sector of the site. By the Tzacualli (AD 1–100) phase, figurines display a relationship to assemblages from Puebla, where a Late Preclassic culture with dense occupations, massive pyramids, and “a rich array of figurines” flourished (Ratray 2001: 363). Kim Goldsmith (2000: ix–x, 9) analyzed 2,415 figurine specimens from all chronological phases at Teotihuacan, which span approximately 900 years. By the Tlamimilolpa phase (AD 170–350), the tradition underwent a significant innovation and molds began to be used for figurine production (Berlo 1982; Sullivan 2005: 14).

In the central coastal plain of the state of Jalisco, in West Mexico, hand-modeled figurines also flourished throughout the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods. Joseph Mountjoy (1991) described 892 figurines at La Pintada, all but one of which was broken, remarking that they resembled earlier figurines from Zacatenco in the Mexican highlands (Lesure 2015; Vaillant 1930).²¹ Mountjoy (1991: 93–94) remarked on the quantity of figurines recovered at La Pintada from a 36-m³ excavation unit, noting that they exceeded the number of pottery sherds. He speculated, tongue in cheek, that if those densities extended throughout the entire site, which he estimated to be 235,000 m², then “one could predict the presence of nearly 12 million figurines.”

Lesure (2011: 126) proffered a global assessment of figurine traditions across Preclassic Mesoamerica. In his view, up until approximately 200 BC a “kind of overall stability among all sequences” prevailed, with local permutations in figurines predominantly short-lived or, if more enduring, characterized by “relatively minor divergences from the basic core set of shared themes.” This changed during the early years of the Late Preclassic period:

Thereafter, the sequences began to diverge from one another more definitively. In Eastern Mesoamerica, local traditions of figurines as common domestic objects often came to an end. The integrity of Central Mexico as an internally coherent figurine-making zone was broken, with declines in some areas (Tlaxcala), even as a lively tradition continued at the urban center of Teotihuacan. In Eastern Mesoamerica, scholars tend to tie the disappearance of figurines to directional social transformations associated with the emergence of stratification and institutions of the state. (Lesure 2011: 126)

Blomster offered another provocative assessment. He suggested that the reduction in figurines in portions of Oaxaca was due to the fact that “some of the social identities and roles that had been materialized in figurines, and subject to engagement and negotiation, were no longer accessible, or desired, by all members of the population” (Blomster 2017: 293). He compared the situation in Oaxaca to the one in Central Mexico, noting that “[d]uring the critical time of early urbanism in both regions, the persistence of figurines at Monte Albán and their flourishing at Teotihuacan indicates continued social negotiations and the assertion of traditional roles, perhaps emblematic of resistance to elite appropriation of ritual and body imagery” (Blomster 2017: 293).

I do not pretend in this book to offer any sweeping generalizations of the dauntingly complex set of variables that characterized the Late Preclassic period throughout Mesoamerica. If anything, the evidence – in many cases incomplete and in all subject to refinement and ongoing evaluation – resists any such thing. The thoughtful analyses of scholars like Lesure and Blomster, however, hint at the need for careful consideration of how changes in figurine usage over time correlate with sociopolitical processes in specific, circumscribed regions.²² Their studies also highlight the fact that these dynamics have not, to date, been viewed alongside a similar assessment of the monumental record and its own engagement with figuration.²³ In the next section I attempt to do just that. My premise is that this larger story of human figuration – in all of its variability regardless of context, medium, or scale – stands to tell us something about the significance of representation, especially if we can say something concrete about whose agenda any single type of representation served.

Much more could be said about the Late Preclassic figurine cessation along the south coast if we knew where figurines had been produced, how they had been distributed, or how they had functioned in preceding eras. Such details continue to elude us even though some provocative clues have emerged. At Middle Preclassic La Blanca, the fact that figurine densities appear to be higher in elite households might be productively compared to Cypher’s (1993) evidence from Chalcatzingo, where figurines were produced in specialized workshops controlled by an elite group.²⁴ But none of this changes the fact that, during the Middle Preclassic period, accessibility to figural forms was actually quite uniform: most people at La Blanca and in the vicinity had ready access to ceramic figurines of some sort. This changed abruptly during the Late Preclassic period, when representations of human bodies in clay diminished and, concomitantly, the life-sized bodies of ruling elites carved of stone proliferated. My guiding premise throughout this chapter and the next is that these

changes were due to the new ways in which the significance of human representation was conceptually framed and situated in this region.²⁵

Implications for the South Coast

The “habitual display of the represented body” (Bailey 2005: 204) that had characterized the Middle Preclassic south coast gave way to a Late Preclassic world in which representation of the human body, at least in durable form, was much more limited. It also was qualitatively different: it was typically larger, more monumental, made of stone, and commissioned at the hands of ruling elites. These elite stone bodies, I argue below, crafted a particular “corporeal politics of being” (Bailey 2005: 204) that redefined the terms of human representation. These new corporeal politics of being worked in tandem with other equally significant innovations that guided the ways in which people experienced Late Preclassic cities. As Love (1999a) argued – following Michel Foucault’s (1977) concept of the structures of discipline and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) and Anthony Giddens’s (1984, 1985) notions of habitual action or daily routine – transformations to the built environments of newly urban Late Preclassic centers impacted the ways in which individuals moved through and experienced those spaces.

When I first began working through these ideas and pondering the implications of the evidence, I was drawn to what now, in hindsight, seems an overly simplistic explanation. I, like others before me (Clark et al. 2000), suspected that the leaders of these new urban centers were able to muster the authority to limit access to or production of ceramic figurines. Such a suggestion is alluring, but quite silent when it comes to explanatory frameworks or mechanisms of control. I fear it overestimates the power of these early states and their leaders. A few scenarios illustrate my concerns. One might, for example, suggest that the figurine cessation was a result of changing regulations over craft production imbued with ritual significance. Evidence from the colonial period illustrates this phenomenon. In his sixteenth-century *Relación de las cosas de Yucatan*, Landa makes clear that the crafting of “idols” was viewed as inherently dangerous and necessitated ritual and technical knowledge. Clark and Houston (1998: 41) elaborated, explaining that “[c]-ontrol over ritual prescriptions, however, would constitute ipso facto control of the production of particular goods. As Landa noted, the carving of idols had to be approved by the priests, and they were intimately involved in providing and controlling the proper conditions of production, for which they were generously paid.”

During the Late Preclassic period along the south coast, however, we do not see more restricted production of figurines, or even more circumscribed contexts of recovery; rather, they just uniformly recede from the archaeological record. There is no evidence that ruling elites began (or continued) to monopolize figurines during the Late Preclassic period, no evidence of new forms of social control in which their production and distribution became constrained to particular socioeconomic spheres. Instead, figurines simply waned in popularity.

Equally unlikely, to my mind, is the possibility that production or distribution of figurines was suddenly “policed” during the Late Preclassic period by a powerful ruler and bands of henchmen. Kenneth Sassaman’s (1998: 93) assertion that only very powerful institutions could hope “to fully constrain the chaos ... of unbridled crafting” is pertinent here. It is hard to imagine that homes, workshops, public spaces, or even hypothetical marketplaces were under strict surveillance by a centralized authority in order to prevent the making or exchange of figurines.²⁶ Such models of absolute political control are extreme, perhaps especially for early and relatively fragile states (see Masson and Freidel 2012 for discussion).

So, too, it seems unlikely that access to clay sources – the same that were used to craft pottery in many cases – could have been effectively curtailed by the administrative apparatus of new Late Preclassic cities in spite of an increased centralization of authority.²⁷ On a sedimentary coastal plain like the south coast, clay beds are ubiquitous (Neff et al. 1992). At Middle Preclassic La Blanca, figurines were produced from the same local clays as ceramics.

It strikes me as equally implausible that the technological knowledge for making and firing figurines – or, for that matter, the social knowledge required to transform them into meaningful representations – was lost. I say this, in great part, because other crafts that utilized the same technologies and which, at times, appear to have been stylistically indebted to the figurine tradition, persisted. At El Ujuxte, a ceramic disk was found in association with a series of offerings apparently intended to venerate several deceased individuals. The disk formed the base for a scene that, at one time, included four small ceramic figures whose size would have approximated that of Middle Preclassic figurines (Fig. 6.7a) (Love 2010: 155, fig. 7.6). Love suggested that it displayed an encounter between two standing and two kneeling figures, long since snapped off, whose relative positioning compares to contemporaneous Late Preclassic stone monuments featuring vassals genuflecting before kings (see Fig. 7.2).²⁸ A Guillén-phase effigy pedestal censer at Izapa, which includes a modeled animal, likewise seems



a



b



c

Figure 6.7 Late Preclassic human figuration in clay: (a) El Ujuxte ceramic disk found in association with Mound 62 burials; (b) El Ujuxte censer; (c) Kaminaljuyu Usulután vessel. Photos (a) and (b) by Michael Love; panel (c) after Shook and Kidder (1952: fig. 66a)

indebted to earlier zoomorphic figurine traditions (Lowe et al. 1982: 133, fig. 7.12e; Lowe et al. 2013: 66, fig. 32c). These examples suggest that the vigorous figurine tradition of previous years was not completely lost nor its meanings abandoned; instead, the technologies were tailored to accommodate different, but far more limited, forms of figural expression.

So what, then, explains the figurine cessation? What explanatory frameworks can be offered that do not grant credit solely to elites for this momentous shift?

The Threat of Figurines

My explanation for these figural shifts rests on the assumptions (1) that figurines carried significant social power, and (2) that this social power posed a threat to fragile emergent states. Chapters 3–5 stressed the social significance of figurines, which was captured as much in their breaking as in their making. To support my second assertion, I explore below a variety of evidence, taking into consideration alternative systems of Late Preclassic figuration as well as the mythic implications of acts of artistic representation. I begin with a focus on the threat posed by figurines from an elite perspective but eventually circle back to a consideration of the same issue from the vantage point of commoners, who had an equally vested interest in the well-being of their social world.

The fragmentation of figurines was less about their destruction than it was about increasing their potency through the creation of multiple smaller pieces that migrated – in ways we do not understand – away from each other. Pieces of fragmented figurines, distributed and shared with other members of a community, likely gave tangible, figural form to social ties or social concerns that clearly exceeded the boundaries of any one person or family. One could counter, quite readily, that this line of reasoning rests too heavily on an unproven model of enchainment. Less controversial, perhaps, is my argument that repeating types of figurines, almost always fragmented, held considerable currency in Preclassic Mesoamerica and likely embodied understandings of personhood and social identity rooted in tensions between the individual and the larger community.

The meanings embodied by figurines would have existed alongside any number of equally significant social concerns, including those of governmental leaders whose self-interests – social, political, and economic – depended on a certain level of centralized power and authority. Dozens, hundreds, or, as at La Blanca, thousands of human representations may have posed a distraction to rulers who wished to nurture social relationships focused around *their* bodies and *their* personas. If we accept that figurines represent tangible symbols of diverse social relationships (regardless of where their fragments wound up or how dispersed they were or were not), then it is hardly a stretch to entertain the possibility that they may have come to be viewed as a threat – or at the very least as a distraction – by early rulers keen to consolidate their own

power. For centuries, the monumental, carved stone bodies of rulers had been used to express authority. What was innovative during the Late Preclassic period was the creation of a visual world, at least along the south coast, in which the bodies of others gradually fell away, leaving in their wake only the monumental bodies of ruling elites. Elite and kingly bodies eventually came to lack competition, if you will, in the form of ceramic figurines and all that they had stood for.

My hunch is that Late Preclassic rulers came to view an emphasis on monumental royal bodies – carved of durable stone, grand in scale, and erected at the most powerful urban centers – as an effective mechanism through which the social utility of ceramic figurines could be undermined. Such monuments effectively refocused attention on royal bodies and their roles in maintaining social order. Much of Late Preclassic art, as I pursue in greater detail in the [following chapter](#), emphasizes the unique powers of ruling elites to harness divine forces and ensure social order. The cessation of the figurine tradition along the Late Preclassic south coast, which occurred in tandem with the explosion of stone monuments focused on the bodies of rulers, speaks volumes about the significance of figural representation in situations of relative power (after Summers 2003: 18).

Scale, viewership, and touch played a role in these shifting dynamics. Due to their small size, figurines are inherently portable, tangible, and touchable. They can travel anywhere, whole or fragmentary, and are experienced fully only when turned and rotated in one's hands. They are, as a result, especially well-suited for private use. I would suggest that these very characteristics were perceived as threatening by ruling elites. Figurines provided a reason, among many others, to gather in intimate settings. Even more importantly, they facilitated the formation of social identities and relationships, some of which undoubtedly competed with those between subject and ruler.

Late Preclassic sculpture challenged the social significance of figurines. It scaled up the bodies of rulers, dwarfing other representations by comparison. It also engaged visually with community members but did so in spaces that were centrally controlled, where elites determined the agendas. Late Preclassic stone sculpture also had novelty and momentum going for it: it was heir to the legacy of Early and Middle Preclassic sculpture, but exponentially more widespread and increasingly vital to defining new urban environments. It surely upended ideas about viewership, scale, context, and so on, and drew people's attention to the larger, more impressive, more awe-inspiring bodies of rulers and gods. Rulers' bodies carved of stone also became more "complete" in the sense

that they required, at this larger scale, less compression and abstraction. They became "models," in that exactitude and detail were desired goals. As Bailey (2005: 29) argued, models serve as effective templates and teaching aides and, in the case of Late Preclassic sculpture, rulers' bodies modeled ideal types as well as ideal behavior (points I return to in [Chapter 7](#)).

Late Preclassic sculpture along the south coast, in contrast with its Early and Middle Preclassic antecedents, did not have to compete for attention in a world that was figurally saturated. Monumentalized elite bodies became quite solitary in their domination. But how? Did Late Preclassic sculpture replace, satisfy, or substitute for the materially manifested, body-based identities of people from diverse walks of life that earlier figurine traditions had helped to fulfill (following Bailey 2005: 145)? I would argue that most likely it did not, or at least not completely. But its existence was premised, nevertheless, on the assertion that it *could* fulfill these needs. My best guess is that unmet needs were satisfied through new social practices that arose to take the place of waning figurine traditions, which emerged in spite of, or perhaps even in response to, the changing Late Preclassic world of figuration.

For example, we should entertain the possibility that there was a Late Preclassic tradition of perishable human representations, not preserved in the archaeological record, which helped to fill the void left by declining figurine use. As [Chapter 3](#) addressed, there is evidence throughout the history of Mesoamerica that objects were made from a variety of ephemeral materials including wax, salt, wood, cloth, amaranth dough, maize, chia seeds, copal, and even paper. One of the most vivid reminders of this possibility appears on Classic-period Bilbao Monument 21 where a figure wears on his hand what appears to be a puppet, probably crafted from perishable materials (Chinchilla 2012: 110; von Winning 1991: 81). There is no way to rule out the possibility that ephemeral materials were also pursued, to great effect, during the Late Preclassic period, satisfying to some degree the social mandate that clay figurines had served in previous eras.

But even if we acknowledge the possibility that ephemeral objects served meaningful roles, there is evidence that durability had intrinsic merit for some Mesoamerican groups (Braakhuis 1987: 29; Houston 2014: 130; Reents-Budet 1998: 76). The act of firing clay, whether in the form of pottery, figurines, or otherwise, fit into a conceptual scheme that linked durability to transformational processes. Stone, arguably, is even more resilient than clay and, when carved, also responsive to the transformative interventions of humans. We also know

from later hieroglyphic texts that stone was viewed as an animate substance and a material well suited to embodying notions of time (Stuart 2010).²⁹ For these reasons, it may have been regarded as an even more potent medium than clay – or anything more fragile and ephemeral – for human representations and, as a result, particularly appropriate for crafting elite likenesses and asserting statements of privilege and power.

Issues beyond medium also mattered. The *manner* in which human representations were rendered appears to have been significant. There is compelling evidence, as I turn to below, to indicate that an interest in the two-dimensional rendering of rulers' bodies, versus bulkier three-dimensional formulations, gained momentum in southeastern Mesoamerica during the Late Preclassic period. Representations of elite bodies also became increasingly codified, participating in broadly shared systems of elite signification that were reiterated sculpturally at many urban centers (Guernsey 2011). Yet the full impact of these changes is not clear unless stone sculpture is placed in conversation with other expressive materials, which also participated – to a more limited extent, I argue – in the Late Preclassic figured world. A brief survey of these alternative traditions of Late Preclassic figuration sets the stage for further discussion.

Alternative Late Preclassic Figural Traditions

Ceramics

Ceramics, some with figural components, may have provided one means through which people continued to engage with human representation during an era of declining figurine usage. Pottery may also have been a medium through which some of the forms, technologies, and meanings inherent to figurines continued to be articulated.³⁰

I noted in Chapter 4 that some vessels at Middle Preclassic La Blanca portray subtly modeled human faces around their circumferences (Fig. 4.15).³¹ The faces share characteristics with figurines including “animating” attributes such as breath beads, deeply incised pupils, and parted lips. While some are quite small and clearly engaged with the same processes of miniaturization as figurines, others are quite large. For example, several storage jars at La Blanca, close to 40 cm in height, portray modeled human faces on the rim. No vessels, to date, have been found at La Blanca that feature *incised* representations of humans; modeling appears to have been the preferred manner for rendering human likenesses on pottery. Interestingly, however, zoomorphic creatures *are*

occasionally incised in two-dimensional terms on pottery, as several examples of post-slip incised Meléndrez grey ware demonstrate (see Love 2002b: fig. 53).³²

Modeled human visages on pottery persisted into the Late Preclassic period at Guillén and Hato phase Izapa (Lowe et al. 1982: figs. 7.10b, h, i and 7.15g) and at El Ujuxte, where they appear on the everted rims of serving vessels and on the bodies of jars (Michael Love, personal communication, 2016). A possible censer from a Late Preclassic burial at El Ujuxte (Fig. 6.7b), although badly damaged, depicts the lower portion of a modeled human body and indicates that complete human bodies, rather than just faces, were also deemed appropriate for this medium. Examples also come from burials in Arenal phase Kaminaljuyu Mound E-III-3. A black-brown fine incised vessel portrays a modeled, rather stylized human face (Fig. 6.7c), while an Usulután ware renders a modeled human figure whose body becomes the vessel and whose face and appendages are formed three-dimensionally (Shook and Kidder 1952: fig. 66a, c).³³ Three-pronged censers at Kaminaljuyu likewise feature three-dimensional effigy heads (Guernsey 2012: fig. 6.4). According to Popenoe de Hatch (1997: 119), a ceramic tradition of three-pronged censers emerged during the Middle Preclassic Providencia phase and continued through the end of the Late Preclassic period.³⁴ The modeled faces on Kaminaljuyu censers often include carefully delineated ears and prominent noses with “breath beads” in the nostrils that compare to those displayed by figurines (Borhegyi 1950; Popenoe de Hatch 1997: 120).

Human representations on Late Preclassic vessels tend to be modeled rather than incised, in keeping with earlier traditions in which human representations on ceramics favored a three-dimensional format. Rarely was the human form rendered two-dimensionally; two-dimensionality appears to have been reserved primarily for zoomorphic and supernatural beings (see, for example, Feuchtwanger 1989: fig. 154).³⁵ Demarcating a strict boundary between two and three dimensions, however, is fraught with difficulty.³⁶ One might suggest, for example, that the human visage on the black-brown fine incised vessel from Late Preclassic Tomb II in Kaminaljuyu Mound E-III-3 (Fig. 6.7c) is moving toward more two-dimensional representation. The hair of the character, although modeled, takes on a linear, calligraphic form that echoes the incised designs on either side of it. Similar tensions between modeling and linear, calligraphic ornamentation characterize Verbena white ware and Usulután vessels from Tomb I in the same structure; the human faces are each engulfed by streaming volutes and scrolls (Shook and Kidder 1952: fig. 74 a,

b).³⁷ These tensions notwithstanding, I am unaware of any Late Preclassic vessels from the south coast or the adjacent Guatemalan Highlands that embrace the sort of two-dimensional, pictorial compositions that would become the hallmark of Late Classic polychrome pottery and in which the expressive potential of the human form in highly narrative compositions would be fully exploited (Reents Budet 1998: 71–72). Nor do we see, during the Late Preclassic period in this region, figural representations on pottery that approach the narrative richness or planar, two-dimensional emphasis typical of contemporaneous monumental sculpture. In short, while Late Preclassic ceramics certainly provided some outlet for figural representation and did so in a manner that retained several key formal and iconographic relationships with earlier figurine traditions, the way in which they rendered human beings differed from that of contemporaneous stone stelae, which emphasized two-dimensional pictorial planes and narrative compositions.

Adornment

Late Preclassic ornamentation also provided an outlet through which to explore figuration, perpetuating traditions established centuries earlier.³⁸ At Early Preclassic La Consentida, for example, Hepp (2015: fig. 7.19) documented a figurine, perforated for suspension, featuring a human body; it compares to the fragmentary pendant from an elite household at La Blanca that portrays a splayed human body framed in a scalloped cartouche (Fig. 5.10). Joyce (2003: fig. 12) illustrated a small, ceramic human figurine from Puerto Escondido suspended for wear, noting that a practice of perforating figurines for suspension increased in frequency over time in Honduras, gaining momentum during the early years of the Late Preclassic period. She asserted that the figurine served as an “intimate form of bodily representation, a kind of mirror in a mirror for the practice of ornamentation” (R. Joyce 2003: 259).

Such evidence indicates that there was at least a spotty tradition of wearing clay objects featuring the human form during the Preclassic period. Better attested during the Middle Preclassic are carved jade or other fine stone representations of whole and fragmentary bodies (see, for examples, Princeton 1995: 256–257). The tendency for figural ornamentation to be made of precious materials hints at an association between its display and economic status. Somewhat surprisingly, however, a perusal of elite individuals portrayed in the corpus of Early and Middle Preclassic art sheds little light on the situation: while individuals do, in many cases, wear jewelry, it is usually not figural, nor does it resemble the greenstone objects of

complete and fragmented human bodies that reside in museum collections.³⁹

By the start of the Late Preclassic period the pictorial representation of figural ornamentation increased, as did its association with elite bodies. This is well illustrated at the site of Takalik Abaj. There, a Late Preclassic offering on Structure 7 included 150 jade pieces, some of which formed small anthropomorphic ceremonial masks like those worn in the belt assemblages of the individuals on Stela 5 (Fig. 6.8; also see Fig. 6.5) (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo 2002: 68–70).⁴⁰ This figural ornamentation was only one part of a much larger Late Preclassic trend in which elite individuals began to be portrayed on monuments in increasingly riotous regalia, as if in declaration of their social and economic privilege. I would suggest that this figural ornamentation, suffused with ancient understandings of the human body and the

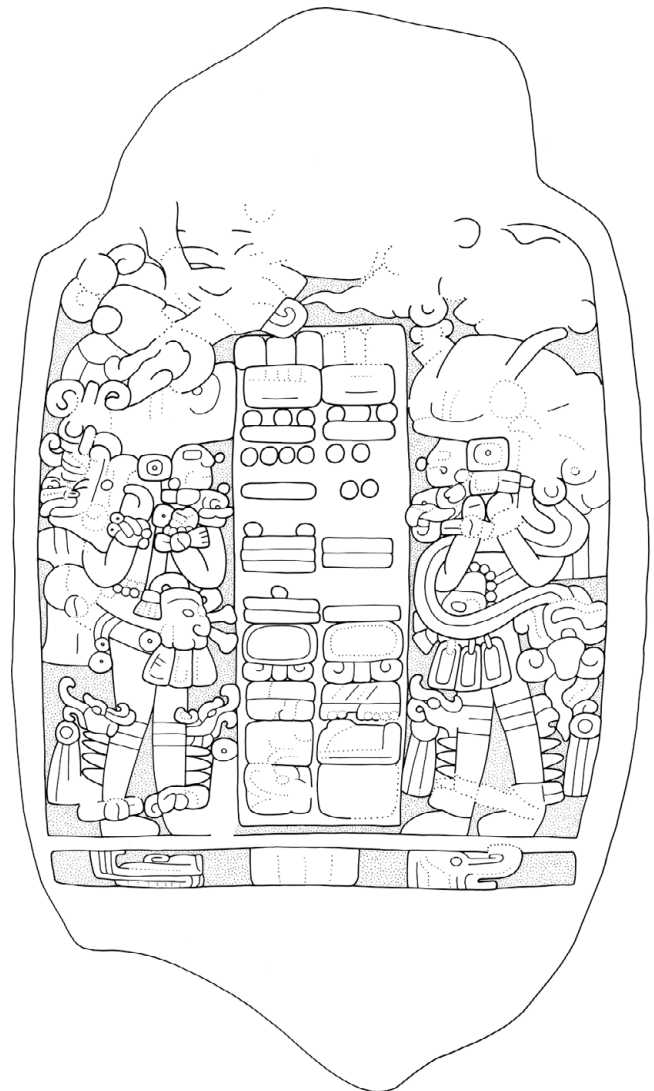


Figure 6.8 Takalik Abaj Stela 5. Drawing by Oswaldo Chinchilla

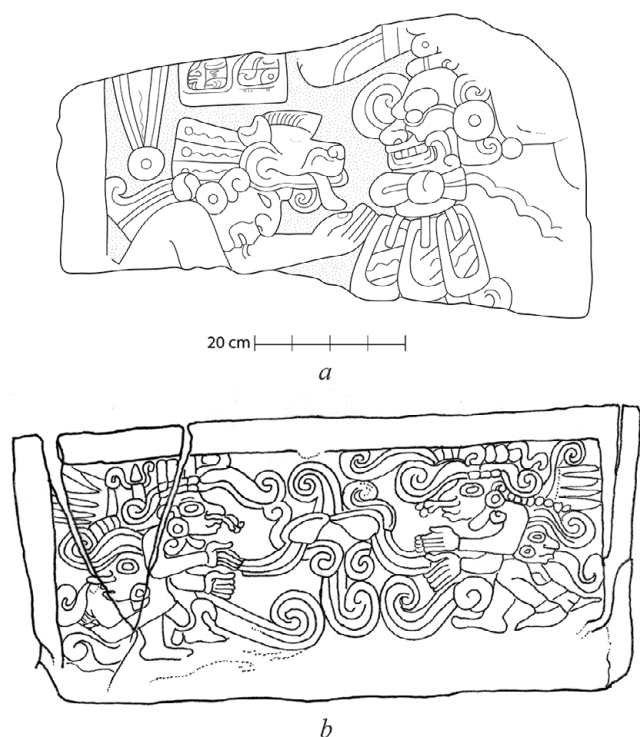


Figure 6.9 Figural adornment portrayed on Late Preclassic monuments: (a) Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 21; (b) La Lagunita Sarcophagus 4, west side. Drawing (a) by Lucia R. Henderson; drawing (b) by author after Fahsen (2010: fig. 10.16)

significance of its representation, carried messages beyond those of status alone. On Takalik Abaj Stela 5, the belt mask worn by the kingly individual at left issues breath beads from its nose, as if animated, while the three celts dangling below would have clanged together with every movement. Henderson (2013: 429) called attention to an anthropomorphic mask worn by an elaborately garbed figure on fragmentary Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 21 (Fig. 6.9a). She interpreted the scroll emerging from the forehead of the mask as a symbolic representation of sound, which signaled the clinking of jade that mask assemblages, suspended from the bodies of rulers and other elite individuals, would have elicited. The animate nature of figural ornamentation is also conveyed by the imagery on La Lagunita Sarcophagus 4, which was carved at the close of the Preclassic period (Fig. 6.9b) (Fahsen 2010: fig. 10.16). The stone box contained two skeletons, likely of elite individuals, and several offerings including a series of figural stone statuettes known as *camahuiles* (Ichon 1977: fig. 5).⁴¹ The west side of the box features two individuals who wear, on their backs, anthropomorphic masks that take the form of disembodied heads. The disembodied heads issue speech scrolls and are as animated as the two protagonists, who stride forward with foliating scrolls emanating from their hands.

Figural Representation and Acts of Creation

When one considers both the archaeological and iconographic evidence, it is clear that the Late Preclassic period was one in which kingly and elite bodies were increasingly privileged in a variety of ways. Stone monuments featured their bejeweled bodies, which faced little competition in terms of alternate figural traditions. Figuration, at least in durable form, had become a privilege and tool of ruling elites.

An explanation for what fueled and sustained these developments, however, requires an even deeper exploration of the conceptual significance of acts of human representation in Mesoamerica. Previous chapters paved the way for this discussion by outlining the extent to which understandings of the social significance of human representation were shared by all tiers of society during the Preclassic period. As I address below, these ancient understandings are also preserved in much later stories, which often liken artistic representations of humans to acts of creation. I believe these stories, although many centuries later in date, hold important clues for understanding the dynamics of the Late Preclassic period, including the abrupt cessation of the figurine tradition in many regions of southeastern Mesoamerica and an explosion of figural forms focused on elite bodies.

Braakhuis (1987: 31) recounted an Ixil tale from Nebaj, Guatemala, for instance, in which a set of older brothers, unable to model humans out of clay, succeeded merely in crafting animals. It was only when a young solar deity emerged on the scene that the first humans were crafted successfully from the same clay. Braakhuis noted that a precursor to this tale, recorded by Bartolomé de las Casas in the Pokomam area (Miles 1957: 736), describes how the older brothers “became presumptuous,” attempting to make creatures against the will of their parents. In this story, too, they were unsuccessful, managing only to make “jugs and jars.” However, their younger brothers, who humbly sought out permission from their parents, succeeded, crafting the first people from the earth.

In both the Ixil and Pokomam stories, the creation of people is characterized as an act of crafting, which utilized clay extracted from the earth. Interestingly, the Ixil story also accounts for animals crafted from clay, raising the possibility that the story was inspired by the many ceramic figurines of animals and humans that are still, to this day, found both in long-abandoned archaeological sites and in the tilled fields of modern farmers. The Pokomam story further explains the origin of pottery and, in a similar vein, may have been inspired by the thousands of ceramic sherds that litter the landscape and were understood as

the vestiges of previous creations. Emily Umberger (1987) called attention to Sahagún's (1950–1982: bk. 11: 221–222) description of Aztec pilgrimages to sites such as Teotihuacan and Tula in which ritual practitioners made offerings and searched for material traces of these legendary cultures, collecting objects including figurines. Overholtzer and Stoner (2011: 183) linked archaeological evidence of such collecting practices to Richard Bradley's (2000) notion of “pieces of places,” which built on Helms's (1993: 99) ideas concerning the symbolic power of objects from geographically or socially distant realms.

Similar themes appear in the Popol Vuh, which describes three failed creations before the final successful one in which modern humans were shaped. In the first, animals were manifested, but they failed to speak or properly recognize and worship the deities who had created them. In the second, earth and mud were employed by the creator deities but to disappointing effect: the mud people became sodden, came undone, and dissolved in water (Christenson 2007: 67). They were not properly “hardened” and made durable through acts of firing (Braakhuis 1987: 32; Houston 2014: 130; Reents-Budet 1998: 76). For the third creation, people were chiseled from wood but, in spite of multiplying and “bearing daughters and sons,” nevertheless lacked the hearts and minds necessary to worship their creators (Christenson 2007: 72). The passages describing the fate of these wooden people, whose eyes were gouged out, heads removed, and bones broken into pieces, surely attest to enduring notions of fragmentation that, during the colonial period, were informed by both indigenous and European vantage points.⁴² They were also – and I think this is especially important – mirrored in the physical world by abundant fragments of figurines, which may have inspired or fueled stories of previous creations and their demise.

In the fourth and final creation described in the Popol Vuh, when maize was finally employed as the medium, it resulted in humans whose “frame and shape were given expression,” according to Christenson's (2007: 183–185) translation:

Thus their countenances appeared like people. People they came to be. They were able to speak and converse. They were able to look and listen. They were able to walk and hold things with their hands. They were excellent and chosen people. Their faces were manly in appearance. They had their breath, therefore they became. They were able to see as well, for straightaway their vision came to them.

This passage's emphasis on the delineation of countenances and an ability to see, hear, and breathe is

noteworthy. From the inception of Mesoamerican traditions of representation in both stone and ceramic, these same attributes – faces that accentuate eyes, noses, ears, and sensory capacity – were crucial. According to Christenson (2007: 185 n. 487), in a literal translation, this act would be expressed as “we were mouthed, we were faced”:

In Quiché, *wach* (face, countenance) carries the connotation of individual “self.” If something is pleasing to a person, it is said to “fall well upon the face” (*utz kaqaj chuwach*). To ask, “How are you?” the question would be phrased, “Is it good your face?” (*La utz a wach?*). Thus the first people thank the gods for having given them their identity, or sense of self. It is also intimately tied to vision. In the previous section, the first men's extraordinary vision is what gave them their ability to gain knowledge.

Although, as Christenson (2007: n. 494) clarified, the gods eventually clouded the vision of humans so as not to impinge on the divine abilities of the gods, modern Maya continue to believe that they “bear within their blood the potential for divine sight.” A similar explication of divine intervention, through which the heads and facial features of humans were crafted, appears in Central Mexican sources. In the Borgia Codex, a deity utilizes an awl to craft a human being, his attention carefully directed to the standing figure's head. For the Aztecs, creation was likened to an artistic process (Braakhuis 1987: 39).

Artistic Acts, the Creation of Knowledge, and Elite Privilege

Certain acts of artistic representation also came to be equated with privileged knowledge in ancient Mesoamerica. Scholars have paid considerable attention to the manifestation of these ideas among the Classic-period Maya and the Aztecs, but it was during the Late Preclassic period that this conceptual matrix of human representation, divine inspiration, and esoteric knowledge began to be fully exploited as an effective means through which to assert – and delimit – sociopolitical power.

Across much of Mesoamerica, the arts and crafts were understood as pertaining to a realm of knowledge maintained by an intellectual and courtly class of artists and scribes (Braakhuis 1987; Coe and Kerr 1997; Reents-Budet 1998). As addressed in Chapter 2, there is evidence beginning in the Early Preclassic period to suggest that certain scribal arts were the privilege of the nobility. The knowledge to produce particular objects went beyond the merely technical, although such skills were certainly

critical; it required esoteric knowledge as well (Costin 2016; DeMarrais et al. 1996; Helms 1993: 53). The display of objects in which technical mastery *and* esoteric knowledge were wed became central to defining rulers and their courtly circles. These objects and their messages, likely displayed in performances and daily practice, were also fundamental to the creation of a privileged realm of “high culture” that signified an “elite intelligentsia that carried the legacy of high Mesoamerican civilization” (Love 2011b: 47; also see Inomata 2001 and R. Joyce 2000b).

This realm of specialized knowledge included writing and calendrics that, in concert with divination and prognostication, elucidated the very workings of time (Braakhuis 1987: 38). Literate artists and scribes, schooled in calendrical, astronomical, and mathematical systems, demonstrated cosmological mastery and a deep understanding of the workings of the world within infinite cycles of time (Reents-Budet 1998: 73). Their intellectual accomplishments also became an increasingly critical aspect of kingly display during the Late Preclassic period. Monuments at Takalik Abaj, Chiapa de Corzo, Tres Zapotes, and El Baúl all record Long Count dates between 36 BC and AD 126 and highlight the fact that Late Preclassic sculpture became a vehicle for asserting specialized knowledge.

Gerardo Aldana (2007: 198–199; also see Braakhuis 1987: 34, 36; Childe 1950: 14) advocated that the suite of knowledge maintained and utilized by elites, which married monumental sculpture with acts of writing and expressions of time, be recognized for its scientific nature. By “science,” Aldana meant “the combination of a communicative basis, a collectively maintained and produced repository of knowledge, and a collectively agreed upon quantifiable phenomenon (or set of phenomena) suitable for investigation.” He qualified, however, that this mathematics and language of time was “vastly different from that subscribed to east of the Atlantic” and “not reducible to pure symbols” but, instead, “retained personality along with computational functionality” (Aldana 2007: 200). It was part of a larger cosmological and organizational system tied to quantifiable temporal periods and the deities that ruled over them. And it came to be utilized by rulers who recognized the utility in linking their own political acts to the machinations of time, the acts of the gods, and the maintenance of social order. Writing, by the Late Preclassic period, was “an act of time-renewal” (Braakhuis 1987: 40, citing Villacorta and Villacorta 1977: 37) and the purview of kings.⁴³

The significance of marrying texts to stone monuments during the Preclassic period should not be underestimated. Acts of inscription, Reents-Budet (1998: 76) argued, made

“thoughts come into being.” Neither should we downplay the significance of placing calendric and textual passages directly on or adjacent to the carved bodies of individuals (Figs. 2.12b, 6.5, 6.6, 6.8). In Preclassic Mesoamerica, art was political and cosmological, scientific and aesthetic, and an integral part of the generative schemes of power embraced by early statecraft (following McAnany 2010: 17). Monuments like La Venta Monument 13, the Monte Albán Danzantes, Takalik Abaj Stela 5, and El Baúl Stela 1 should be viewed as early attestations of the utility in linking esoteric information to the human body for assertions of sociopolitical authority.

These innovations, which gained momentum throughout the Preclassic period, also materialized ideologies of domination. The monuments were “ideologically loaded” in that the capacity to fully understand their references was limited to the cognoscenti of elite social circles (Inomata 2001). They became a tool – a physical one, but also an esoteric and aesthetic one – in the hands of elites, one of many signaling devices employed to differentiate nobility from the rest of society (Costin 2001: 334). Baines’s (2007: 116, 291) assessment of the relationship between state formation and writing in ancient Egypt is pertinent to Preclassic Mesoamerica: “In its interactive relationship with the state, writing intensified the material deprivation of most of society.”

Even monuments without text, I would argue, functioned in a similar manner. The narrative scenes on many of the Izapa stelae, for example, relied on specialized knowledge of gods and myths and symbols that probably few beyond the most highly educated possessed, at least in any comprehensive sense. That was the point: knowledge needed to be constrained to elite circles in order to maintain its value, so that elites alone had “the knowledge necessary to encode and decode key messages” (Costin 2001: 335). Late Preclassic monuments were economically and materially instituted ideas of elite privilege; they were symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991). Their sheer proliferation during the Late Preclassic period also suggests that they were vital to an era of increasing competition. Elites needed to develop artistic programs that not only clarified their privileged status but also linked them to other elites through shared imagery, messages, and formal vocabularies (Guernsey 2006b, 2011, 2012; Inomata 2001: 322; Reents-Budet 1998: 72).

The Efficacy of (Some) Human Representations in Mesoamerica

Late Preclassic sculpture materialized, in the durable medium of stone, a cosmological world in which rulers

and gods, myth and history intermingled. Its proliferation throughout southeastern Mesoamerica, especially when viewed in light of the concomitant cessation of the figurine tradition, suggests that it may have come to be viewed, at least to some degree, as a particularly effective form of ritual expression activated under the aegis of the ruler.

Cathy Costin (2016: 4) recently discussed the significance of reliability to ritual expression. Populations suffer, she argued, if ritual objects fail to appropriately embody supernatural power, appease the deities, or ensure the continuity of life. Reliability, Costin stressed, mattered. My suspicion is that similar notions were directly involved in the surge of Late Preclassic monumental stone sculpture, which gradually replaced vibrant figurine traditions with one that emphasized the bodies and acts of rulers. These monuments, I believe, came to be viewed as more effective. They were not merely a substitute for the figural tradition that had previously thrived in the form of ceramic figures; they were a more *reliable* substitute. The diminution of the figurine tradition certainly suggests that, by the advent of the Late Preclassic period, figurines came to be regarded as less pertinent to daily life. Figurines, utilized for centuries in diverse spaces, many beyond the purview of the ruler, may even have come to be viewed as a bit dangerous in the sense that they “failed to appropriately embody or direct supernatural power” (Costin 2016: 4). Or, at the very least, they did not embody supernatural power as effectively as the monuments of rulers. The diminution of figurines, following this logic, might be attributable to a certain amount of “policing by conformity,” in which members of the community gradually began to fall in step, began to conform to new shared understandings of the unreliability and potential chaos that “unbridled crafting” in the form of ceramic figurines might generate (after Sassaman 1998).⁴⁴

Clark and Houston (1998) discussed how, during the colonial period in Yucatán, some forms of ritual crafting were “viewed as inherently dangerous” and, as a result, “surrounded by a host of ritual prescriptions. The practice of these arts would have required much more than a knowledge of technical processes.” It may very well be that the Late Preclassic period was one in which people began to believe that figural representation, imbued as it was with powerful associations, was best left in the hands of those who possessed specialized knowledge, those most able to summon the divine authorization for their creations. Abandoning figurine traditions may have been viewed as a wise, even risk-avoidant practice. But such choices, it is important to stress, would have been predicated on ancient, widely held understandings of the

power of human representation and the social responsibilities associated with it. As David Freedberg (1989: 74) posed, albeit in regard to a very different time, place, and set of social circumstances: “If statues are invested with life, or work miracles, or are capable of being dangerous, why should attempts not be made to bind them?”

Again, passages in the Popol Vuh provide some insight into the contingent relationships between reliability and figural representation. In the story of the wooden people we learn that objects – even those crafted by deities and with all the right appearances – could fail if unable to forge an enduring, reciprocal relationship with the gods:

And when they had spoken, straightaway the effigies of carved wood were made. They had the appearance of people and spoke like people as well. They populated the whole face of the earth. The effigies of carved wood began to multiply, bearing daughters and sons.

Nevertheless, they still did not possess their hearts nor their minds. They did not remember their Framer or their Shaper.... They were merely an experiment, an attempt at people. At first they spoke, but their faces were all dried up. Their legs and arms were not filled out. They had no blood or blood flow within them. They had no sweat or oil. Their cheeks were dry, and their faces were masks. Their legs and arms were stiff. Their bodies were rigid. (Christenson 2007: 72–73)⁴⁵

These objects of wood, while resembling humans and possessing necessary attributes like faces and limbs, failed due to their inability to properly engage with the gods. They *looked* right but were, nevertheless, ineffective.

I wonder if the gradual formulation of similar beliefs, which long pre-date those recorded in the Popol Vuh, led to the demise of the Preclassic figurine tradition. Figurines possessed many of the defining features of humans, including carefully rendered and communicative faces often with parted lips and open eyes. But, by the Late Preclassic period, their utility appears to have diminished. Perhaps they became like the wooden people in the Popol Vuh: they captured human likenesses but, nevertheless, were unreliable. Perhaps their efficacy paled in comparison to the rituals carried out by rulers and memorialized in stone. To be sure, one key message reiterated over and over again on Late Preclassic sculpture and throughout these new urban centers was that kingly bodies were effective. They were *reliable*.

I would go so far as to suggest that rulers came to be viewed as more reliable due, at least in some part, to the monumental art programs that reiterated their superiority again and again. Rulers, through artistic programs and performances that mirrored the imagery, became the

vehicle through which cosmological order was believed to be most efficiently channeled and distilled. It is not hard to imagine that small representations crafted of clay and wielded by anyone and everyone began to be perceived as less potent, less effective. To my mind, Late Preclassic art programs were successful in asserting, in a variety of ways, that the *king's* body was best able to mediate between the natural world and that of the gods, that *kings* embodied esoteric knowledge, proper comportment, and divinely sanctioned authority. Kings were reliable.

In making these arguments I am reminded of Pasztory's (1997: 234) assertion, directed at later Classic-period sculpture but equally salient here, that "the impressive power shown on the monuments is a wish rather than a reality. The monuments worked, just as 'whistling in the dark' works in keeping fear away." Pasztory's warning is well taken, but I would counter that Late Preclassic monuments did not just "whistle in the dark" ineffectively. Their success depended on the fact that they subsumed collective values and beliefs concerning acts of human representation that were understood by people from all walks of life. They did what earlier sculpture *and* earlier figurines had done, distilling all of those meanings into a single, prominent vehicle: monumental art. Late Preclassic monuments seduced and enchanted, to borrow Pasztory's words, through message, aesthetics, context, and a relentless monopoly on the human form. The legacy of Late Preclassic sculpture, whose forms and messages would endure throughout the Postclassic period, is perhaps the greatest testimony to its success.

The Efficacy and Authenticity of Images in Other Parts of the World

Many of the ideas in this chapter were inspired by thinking about how various cultures around the globe have grappled with debates concerning the efficacy and authenticity of images and representations. I wish to consider several examples in spite of the fact that they are far removed in time and space from Preclassic Mesoamerica and arose in radically different social circumstances. They nevertheless provide insight into the ways in which figural imagery can be targeted, threatened, or favored. Perhaps most importantly, they demonstrate how depictions and responses to them are inevitably enmeshed in understandings of the power of representation.

In AD 754 the Synod of Hieria confronted a series of problems concerning "false" and "true" images and debated whether or not "the divine" or "the nature of Christ" could be represented at all. According to Claudia Wenzel (2011: 266), "[t]ruthfulness of representation

was . . . the point of departure for the Byzantine theologians who debated on the refusal or affirmation of images." True representations, she explained, were those that fully participated in the divine. Wenzel (2011: 277) used this debate from the Byzantine world to frame deliberations concerning "religiously efficacious" images of the Buddha in India and China in spite of the fact that a "comparable discourse on religious images," like that which transpired in the Synod of Hieria, is lacking for the first centuries AD. An image cult of Buddha flourished in some regions of ancient China and India where his anthropomorphic representation was considered to be divine and as religiously efficacious as his relics. In other regions, however, the Buddha's image was contested by individuals who argued that an insurmountable gap existed between the "genuine body of the Buddha" and portrayals of him (Wenzel 2011: 286).

By AD 845, there were organized iconoclastic attacks on images of the Buddha fueled by political authorities in China. Such acts involved not only the destruction of depictions of the Buddha but also the confiscation of monastic land. Wenzel (2011: 288) underscored the economic significance of these iconoclastic efforts:

Imperial attacks on the religion included the demolition of images, the closing or destruction of monasteries, the confiscation of monastic land, and the forceful return of monks and nuns into lay life. The economic reasons behind this are well known: monasteries had accumulated incredible wealth and thereby gained political influence; clerics did not pay any taxes and were not subject to secular law, and the sheer material value of Buddhist statues provided an incentive to melt them down and make them into coins or weapons.

There is, obviously, no exact analogy between these events and those that transpired in Late Preclassic Mesoamerica. But the information assembled by Wenzel is helpful for pointing to the ways in which image cults, particularly those that thrive in private domains, can pose a threat to both the political and economic authority of ruling elites. They require effort, energy, and resources, often involving many people, and are not necessarily performed in the interest of the government. Wenzel's arguments also illustrate that debates concerning the efficacy of images were inextricably intertwined with the economics of their production, display, and viewership. This is an important point to which I will circle back, below.

An even earlier example from ancient Greece demonstrates similar concerns. Christopher Faraone (2012: 218) described a passage in Plato's *Laws* in which the elimination of household cults is deliberated. The ramifications of the eradication of household cults included the

transference of cultic activity to priests, which ensured public performance of the rituals and state oversight. “Impious” individuals would be prevented from engaging in “fraudulent” ritual, the negative results of which might affect the whole state.⁴⁶ In this case, economic considerations – private ritual versus public pageantry – were combined with concerns for oversight, control, authenticity, and the public’s well-being.

I propose that similar apprehensions concerning private or non-state-sanctioned ritual may have occupied the minds of Late Preclassic Mesoamerican ruling elites. Figurine-related activities or rituals in domestic and community spaces certainly carried economic ramifications: they potentially diverted people from agricultural or subsistence activities and from fully participating in the evolving bureaucratic apparatus – not to mention the evolving ritual apparatus – of early states. Figurine use also often took place in contexts removed from the public sphere where emphasis was likely placed on the negotiation of individual or household or community identity and accompanied by craft production, cooking, and feasting, all of which were nodes within larger webs of economic activity.⁴⁷ More to the point for this study, figurine use required time, commitment, and an engagement with human figuration that was, arguably, at odds with many of the goals of incipient states and their leaders. It distracted people from public rituals focused on the images, bodies, and identities of kings and gods. And this point, more than any other, circles back to the focus of this book. The Middle to Late Preclassic sociopolitical transformations along the south coast of Mesoamerica were negotiated, in no small way, through representation of the human body. Little changed concerning fundamental understandings of the power of human representation from the Early Preclassic period onward; that was a constant. What changed at the cusp of the Late Preclassic along the south coast was *whose* bodies were represented, and which were construed as most ritually and socially effective. The cessation of the figurine tradition is an extraordinarily significant index of these changing understandings of figuration and its ritual and political impact.

The concept of “outsourcing” provides another instructive model for thinking about these transformations. Monica Smith (personal communication, 2014) suggested that the cessation of the figurine tradition in Preclassic Mesoamerica and the contemporaneous surge in public sculpture, clearly in the service of the ruler, constituted an “outsourcing” of authority, in which ritual was gradually removed from the general population and placed in the hands of privileged and empowered rulers. A relatively recent example of “outsourcing” illustrates the concept. In an opinion piece for the *New York Times*

on August 11, 2011, Timothy Egan noted that the governor of Texas at that time, Rick Perry, declared a three-day period of prayer for rain as a solution for the severe drought and raging wildfires in Texas. Perry also hoped that the prayers would help to end a concomitant economic slowdown. Egan characterized Perry’s actions as a form of governance predicated on “outsourcing to the supernatural.” And while the rains did not come, nor the wildfires diminish – and, ironically, as Egan noted, the Saturday prayer event was followed, on Monday, by the worst day on Wall Street since 2008 – approximately 30,000 people rallied around Perry’s call to action and partook in the event. Perry presided over it, leading the prayers, while a giant screen projected his image above the stage in Houston.

My point here is that outsourcing is not unique to ancient societies: it’s a tried and true tactic, attested repeatedly throughout the course of history, in which ritual is placed in the hands of a leader who is viewed as a more powerful or effective conduit to the divine. Equally important is the fact that outsourcing is not driven solely by a top-down agenda, in which people are forced, at the hands of political elites, to abandon their own ceremonies and acquiesce to the ritual authority of rulers. It is, rather, a model that accommodates “bottom-up” agendas on the premise of efficiency. I would suggest that, along the Late Preclassic south coast, outsourcing was founded on the belief that it was far more expedient for a single individual – the ruler – to manage the very issues previously addressed by hundreds or thousands of individuals at a small scale. In the hands of a leader, ritual became concentrated rather than diffuse. It became more efficacious and more efficient. By the same token, if freed from certain ritual burdens, people had more time to tend fields and perform the myriad of other activities that new, urban environments demanded (Childe 1950: 13). In this scenario, people were not duped by rulers; they cooperated in the system. They possessed agency and *chose* to abandon figurine traditions in the name of efficiency and efficacy.

Late Preclassic imagery from the south coast, especially when viewed in light of the figurine cessation, provides insight into these sociopolitical machinations. On carved stelae and altars, rulers were materialized adjacent to gods. Their actions reverberated with mythic significance and situated them as exemplars of moral order. Their images monopolized the representational domain; they were more visible, more durable, and larger than anything else. But they were also redolent of centuries of representational significance that had accrued in diverse forms and mediums. Stelae portraying rulers were bigger and better and intended to project greater

“efficiency” than ceramic figurines, but they were as indebted to them as to earlier traditions of stone carving.

The monuments doubtless worked in tandem with the actual bodies of rulers, each mutually reinforcing the other and instantiating a vision of order materialized through the persona of the ruler. Although this is difficult to prove archaeologically, the massive plaza spaces at a site like Izapa (Fig. 6.1) suggest that they served as venues for large groups of people, gathered for public rituals presided over by the ruler, priests, and members of the court. The imagery on many of the monuments may have mirrored the performances or, as I noted at the beginning of the chapter, perhaps the reverse was true. Perhaps the performances mirrored the imagery, which persisted long after any one ruler came and went.

When walking through the center of Izapa, one would have been greeted by numerous representations of charismatic rulers – not specific individuals, necessarily, but more likely idealized exemplars – engaged in a suite of activities intended to ensure a harmonious relationship with the gods and nature. These images did more than adorn the environment, however. They structured the spaces in tandem with architecture and, like them, became synonymous with the cities themselves, an inseparable part of their urban fabric. Granted, there are also many plain or uncarved monuments at a site like Izapa. But this fact does not detract from the fact that figuration – especially of rulers and gods – repeats again and again at Izapa and elsewhere. It mattered, and quite literally punctuated the urban environment with messages that reinforced the political, economic, and social significance of the rulers and their royal acts of engagement. Even if Late Preclassic monuments portrayed prototypical rulers rather than historically specific ones, the stelae situated them as men par excellence, the representatives and quintessence of community and all the individuals that compose it, to paraphrase Baudez (2000: 135).

A sculptural emphasis on the bodies of rulers – and especially individual, historically specific rulers – would become a hallmark of Classic-period sculpture (Baudez 2000). But it was during the Preclassic period that imagery focused on the bodies and actions of rulers first began to accrue meaning and significance within the urban environment. By the Classic period, the persona of the ruler became a proxy for the very identity of a city as a physical place and discrete polity. Houston et al. (2010 [2003]: 215) noted that, “[a]t present, there is not a single, attested term in Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions for cities per se or for the polities that heavily concern Mayanists. The ruler and his titles predominate instead.” Cities were, they continued, the “place(s) of residence for the native lord.” Invoking Émile

Durkheim’s (1961, 1965) ideas concerning morality and society, Houston et al. (2010 [2003]: 232) asserted that the “holy lord” who ruled over a kingdom did so by embodying moral order, one that “necessitates belief and presupposes that people do not see the moral system as a lie.” They clarified, however, that such a system did not preclude independent thought or differing perspectives, but instead created an environment in which there were causal relationships between commitments, actions, and social responsibility. The system provided a framework of “shared explanations and expectations” through which “the disquiet between individual and group needs” and the “messiness” of social and political realities was bridged (Houston et al. 2010 [2003]: 232–233).

Again, we can find many examples of similar dynamics from around the globe. Bennet Bronson (2000: 123) described how treatises written in late third-century BC China attributed the Han Dynasty’s success and legitimacy to the “virtuous character of the ruler,” who was responsible for the welfare of all, from commoners to elites. As early as 500 BC, the *Book of Documents* purportedly compiled by Confucius states that “[h]eaven awards a mandate to rule the world to an exceptionally virtuous individual” (Bronson 2000: 124). This belief system was maintained through “a judicious mixture of punishment, reward, and propaganda aimed at persuading one’s subjects that respect for order is binding and its maintenance justified” (Bronson 2000: 124). The histories do not presume, Bronson clarified, that elites were more committed to the maintenance of order than commoners. The evidence suggests that, for most people, the “grand abstractions of political theory and ritual were less essential than the perception that the system did function: that government services were efficient, that the economy was prosperous, that life was secure, and that the emperor was concerned and just” (Bronson 2000: 127).

For Mesoamericans, as with the Chinese, the moral obligations of rulers were also situated economically: the ruler was charged with ensuring agricultural fertility and appeasing the gods, but also with mobilizing resources through political engagement with neighbors, for reducing risk and for forging alliances in order to access non-local commodities (Hirth 1992: 26). Public performances, sculptural programs, and spectacles visualized a ruler’s economic prowess (Guernsey 2016). Many of these same premises, as I outlined in Chapter 1, are central to the concept of elite “high culture.” Although Baines and Yoffee (2000: 16) maintained that high culture was, essentially, an elite matter, Van Buren and Richards (2000: 9; also see A. Joyce et al. 2001) questioned this exclusivity, insisting that “the creation and maintenance of civilization involved a diverse array of players and processes.” These

processes were also naturalized, with art playing a key role (Joyce 2000b: 64). From the perspective of an individual within the system, order did not result from the control of wealth and legitimacy, Joyce argued. Order authorized legitimacy, which in turn generated wealth:

The preferential consumption of high art becomes a moral act that evinces cosmic order. Elites become exemplary participants in that cosmic order. As Baines and Yoffee (1998) argue, there is little incentive for non-elites to question the order in which they now live. And perhaps even the strongest claim Baines and Yoffee make – that most high culture is essentially self-referential and unconcerned with non-elites – can be sustained, with Classic Maya art directed primarily at a narrow audience of elites, motivated primarily to satisfy their felt need for luxuries that were their unquestioned right within the Mesoamerican civilizational order. (R. Joyce 2000b: 76)

I would qualify Joyce's assertions. While, perhaps, there was little "incentive for non-elites to question the order" around them, I still think that the efficacy of the system relied on more than only the approval and participation of elites. It was founded on ideas that were equally germane to commoners and required their buy-in: understandings of the power inherent in representation of the human form, in the significance of ornamentation, in the necessity of articulating sensory capacity, and in the recognition of an indissoluble relationship between humans and the workings of time. All of these ideas had guided, for centuries, systems of representation in figurine traditions: they were ancient, widely shared across the socioeconomic spectrum, and pervasive across much of Mesoamerica. They were also appropriated by Late Preclassic elites throughout much of southeastern Mesoamerica and successfully incorporated into monumental art traditions, ultimately at the expense of the figurine tradition. But to suggest that these ideas, once relegated primarily to the world of monumental art, were of little interest or pertinence to non-elites strikes me as illogical. Yes, these notions were redirected and transferred unilaterally to the bodies of kings and gods, but they nevertheless required at least a certain amount of internalization by the populace. The cessation of the Preclassic figurine tradition suggests that this reconfiguration – a new definition of whose body mattered and why – was ultimately successful, so much so that commoners "threw in with the king" and abandoned their own practices of figuration. But these processes did not transpire because commoners were duped, because the issues were not relevant or comprehensible to them, or because there was little incentive for them to question the very nature or implications of the outcomes. These processes succeeded

because most people concluded that it made better sense for them to focus their efforts on other things. It involved deliberate choices that made sense to them.⁴⁸

I would assert that we see, in Late Preclassic artistic programs, a focused attention to situating kings as the representative beings, *par excellence*, of their communities (after Baudez 2000: 135). In a compelling essay, Gillespie (2008b: 127), following Ernst Kantorowicz (1997), suggested that, for the Late Classic Maya, the ruler's body became synonymous with the "body politic," incorporating all other members of his state.⁴⁹ The Late Classic Maya ruler – like Kantorowicz's European monarchs – embodied two contrasting bodies: one was individual and the other "an immortal symbol of the political collective." The totalizing quality of the king's "two bodies" was predicated on an understanding of embodied personhood, in which the king constructed himself but was equally constructed through his relationships to other persons (Gillespie 2008b: 131). The reiteration of the king's image quite literally multiplied his presence throughout the urban environment (Houston and Stuart 1998: 90, 95).

Gillespie argued that these ideas concerning the ruler were fully expressed in the artistic record beginning in the seventh century AD. I would suggest, however, that their conceptual underpinnings are far more ancient, stemming from understandings of the body and embodiment formulated in both Preclassic monumental art programs *and* figurine traditions. The "notion that Maya kings were comparable in their intersubjective relationships with both nobles and commoners" (Gillespie 2008b: 132) was extraordinarily indebted to understandings of the power of human representations that had flourished for millennia, and which had long navigated social divides and penetrated a variety of social spaces. It was at the cusp of the Late Preclassic period, I would argue, that human representation began to be exploited more fully, by ruling elites, for its ability to both embrace *and* exclude.

These Late Preclassic figural reconfigurations were the result of a certain "philosophical theorization" of human representation that was both a logical continuation of ancient thought and, simultaneously, a radical departure (after Elsner 2000: 177). They were also concerned with the politics of aesthetics. By this I mean that the monopoly on figuration that Late Preclassic monumental art established was a means through which the "aesthetico-political field of possibility" was manipulated (Ranciere 2004: 3). At first glance, one might conclude that rulers were "embodied" and commoners "disembodied" or excluded from the aesthetic-political field of figural representation. But I think that it is far more interesting than this. Late Preclassic art, visually focused on the bodies of rulers, was very much a part of "high culture," but it also

engaged with collective concerns, casting them as part of the ruler's moral obligations. The pivot – for messages of elite privilege *and* the broader urban collective – was the royal body. Late Preclassic monumental art was, ironically, as indebted to the demise of figurine traditions as it was to the fundamental understandings of human representation that they constituted. This irony is an excellent reminder that the art that a society produces is no more important than the art that a society does not, or in this case, ceases to produce (*sensu* Elsner 1988: 472).

These Late Preclassic material, aesthetic, and philosophical processes may have given rise to the sorts of narratives, like those recorded in the Popol Vuh and elsewhere, of prior, unsuccessful “creations.” Ceramic figurines were slowly set aside, it seems, because they were viewed as flawed or, at the very least, ineffective in the wake of the rituals of kings. Yet they remained a visible and tangible part of the past, poking up from earth, perhaps even inspiring stories of humans from a previous era who had met their demise (Fig. 5.15) (Chinchilla 2017: 64; Hamann 2002: 352). Such musings are difficult to substantiate; yet what remains clear is that the decision to gradually abandon the production of figurines along the south coast paralleled a florescence of new, monumental art forms focused on the bodies of rulers and their proper, moral, paradigmatic behavior. The figural, in this case, cannot be teased apart from the social. Alice Stevenson (2017: 77–79) argued exactly this for the disappearance of hand-modeled figurines in Predynastic Egypt from Naqada IIC (c. 3450 BC) onward:

With the introduction of new sources of social power and ritual knowledge ... the narrative repertoires within which figurines had been animated previously were likely to have been destabilized as community boundaries and collective action were re-negotiated. There were also likely to have been repercussions in bodily customs, for as Mary Douglas maintained (e.g. Douglas 1973) the human body is a fundamental symbol in ritual processes; how it is presented, ornamented, or handled is considered to be a central marker of wider social values. Arguably, as state formation processes gathered pace in Naqada IIC-D, those values were reconfigured profoundly to the detriment of previous modes of corporeal expression and materialization.

The Venues for Late Preclassic Social Identity and Expression

None of this is to say that Late Preclassic transformations along the south coast were met without dissent. It seems

likely that some individuals must have bemoaned the many paroxysms ushered in by processes of state formation, urbanization, and even changing social understandings of figuration. Looking at monumental art alone, in isolation, is misleading: its idealized imagery and narratives prioritize kingly accomplishments and social order. But the Late Preclassic world was likely, as Tonio Hölscher (1998: 183) described for fifth-century BC Athens, “a balancing act without net that must have created an ambivalent state of collective psychology, between euphoric self-assertion and profound self-doubt, in which all themes of social import were discussed, represented, celebrated, and questioned without end.” I would guess that the same sorts of conversations, questions, and debates – on the part of people from all corners of society – were inspired by the transformations of the Late Preclassic period. While monumental art emphasizes the positive outcomes of divinely sanctioned authority and articulates an urban identity that pivoted around the bodies of kings, other data reveal that this was one of many different narratives being forged during this period along the south coast.

For example, the archaeological record confirms that, in spite of the figurine cessation, private ritual in households was alive and well. Alternative ritual activities, enacted beyond the purview of the king, continued to facilitate the forging of social identities that were separate and perhaps even in contestation with those advocated by ruling elites. Love (Love 2016; Love and Castillo 1997; Love et al. 2002; also see Guernsey 2012: 118–119) discussed the new tradition of domestic burials that emerged at the beginning of the Late Preclassic period at the site of El Ujuxte. At Middle Preclassic La Blanca, only two burials have been discovered in household mounds to date (Michael Love, personal communication, 2016). Household burials were rare, and the dead must have been disposed of in a different way or in a different place during the Middle Preclassic period, perhaps through cremation or in a yet undiscovered community graveyard.⁵⁰ In contrast, the practice of burying the dead in domestic compounds is well attested at Late Preclassic El Ujuxte, where the deceased were accompanied by post-mortem offerings including the unusual ceramic disk that featured a scene of interacting individuals (Fig. 6.7a) or whole and fragmentary vessels that, on occasion, contained the body of a decapitated juvenile (Arredondo 2002).⁵¹ These offerings appear to represent a form of ancestor veneration (Arredondo 2002; Love 2016; Love et al. 2002). The attested practices of decapitation or missing limbs at El Ujuxte (described in the [previous chapter](#)) also indicate a belief in bodily partibility and the agency of isolated body parts, which perpetuated

earlier traditions enacted, in great part, through figurine practices. Corporeal wholeness “was not a precondition for social potency” at El Ujuxte (to paraphrase Geller 2014: 31). That the ceramic disk, which features only vestiges of once-whole persons, was interred in association with burials in Mound 62 containing fragmentary bodies suggests that understandings of the relationship between partible bodies and partible ceramic representations had not been entirely lost, in spite of the dramatically waning figurine tradition.

I would stop short of suggesting that the cessation of the figurine tradition was a trigger for the development of new mortuary treatments along the south coast; that would assuredly be an oversimplification. But I nevertheless suspect that these new burial traditions were developed in response to the same sorts of social paroxysms that fueled the cessation of the figurine tradition. At the very least, these new mortuary practices provided an alternative means through which people could express social identity at a juncture when other traditional vehicles for its expression were being abandoned. They represented “an attempt to maintain the identity and coherence of the household and lineage in the face of challenges from centralized institutional power” (Love 2016).

Love’s suggestion is provocative. Grove and Gillespie (2002: 13) contended that burials placed beneath the floors of homes are best understood as a form of domestic ritual that reflects the decisions made by surviving kin and community members. They cited Hendon’s (2000) observations that burials, together with associated objects, “contribute to the construction of social memory within the household, further shaping its self-identity” (Grove and Gillespie 2002: 13). McAnany (1995) asserted that the veneration of ancestral remains, because of their centrality to the forging and maintenance of kinship structures in Mesoamerica, was a social process that often entered into conflict with kingship. Ancestors, she argued, are, in essence, a “social construct” (McAnany 1995: 60), and the social construction of ancestry – tied as it is to land entitlements and other economic prerogatives – can pose challenges to the centralization of authority. Accordingly, the burials from Late Preclassic El Ujuxte might productively be viewed as constituting a response to the consolidation of power in the hands of rulers, a means through which individual household identity was forged. At a very basic level, these changes in the domestic sector provide an important foil to those perceptible in the civic sector (Guernsey 2012: 119; Love 2016).

Perhaps the El Ujuxte burials represent practices that eluded structures of discipline and power. Here I am

thinking of Michel De Certeau’s (1984) essay “Walking in the City,” which was, in great part, a challenge to Foucault’s ideas concerning structures of power. De Certeau maintained that the lived experiences of city dwellers were what constituted the city, not amorphous “structures of power.” Citizens of El Ujuxte, even when moving throughout the rigid urban grid of El Ujuxte that was redolent with the power of the state, would have been cognizant of these burial practices, of the ancestors that resided beneath the foundations of homes. The El Ujuxte burials indicate that Late Preclassic urban transformations and tensions continued to be negotiated through mechanisms anchored to understandings of the human body, its manipulation, and its presentation, even in death. A consideration that includes the interred bodies of El Ujuxte, the monumental stone ones at other sites, as well as larger trends, including the cessation of the figurine tradition, reveals how bodies – actual and represented, fragmented and whole, imagined and repressed – were central to the ways in which the social transformations of the Late Preclassic period were negotiated along the south coast. The El Ujuxte evidence also reminds us that the trope of bodily fragmentation, even though appropriated by Late Preclassic rulers into their political rhetoric as on El Jobo Stela 1 (Fig. 5.9) or Izapa Stela 21 (Fig. 6.4), was never theirs alone to claim.

Discussion

The cessation of the figurine tradition was but one process within the complex social milieu that characterized the Late Preclassic period. It was not a phenomenon unto itself in southeastern Mesoamerica, but part of a sweeping reevaluation of the significance of representations of the human body that depended on, more than ever before, *whose* body was actually represented. This understanding was not developed in isolation, or only in elite circles, or purely in the medium of stone and at a grand scale. It developed at the many points of intersection between figurines, sculpture, and actual human bodies that transpired throughout the course of the Preclassic period. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Late Preclassic sculpture blossomed *because* of the figurine cessation. But I am suggesting that its remarkable florescence occurred in tandem with it and that both – and perhaps this is the crux of the matter – were predicated on understandings of the representational possibilities of human figuration. The nexus of understandings that coalesced around human representation were what fueled, during the Late Preclassic period, both the decline of figurine traditions and the

proliferation of monuments portraying the bodies and deeds of kings.

Along the Late Preclassic south coast, it is quite clear that representations of kings came to be, over time, viewed as more effective, more reliable, more risk avoidant than the representations of other people that had been crafted in clay for centuries. Rulers' bodies, more than anybody else's, became the nexus of complex – and paradoxical assertions – of social privilege and collective action. They signified repositories of exclusionary knowledge and, simultaneously, were the vehicles through which interventions on behalf of all society were localized and performed. Royal destiny was social destiny (after Baines 2007: 289). And royal bodies secured “a monopoly for elite versions of the ‘truth’” (Wolf 1999: 189).

As I have tried to emphasize throughout this chapter, simple generalizations do little to explicate the complexities of this period in Mesoamerican history. There was never a single agenda or a single response, even if we focus our lens on the south coast. Figurines did not disappear abruptly, nor did they do so at the same pace in every corner of any one region. Neither was sculpture suddenly configured in novel formats at a single moment in time, in one precocious city, or in one particularly inspired region: increasing emphases on two-dimensional surfaces, narrative compositions, kingly bodies, and the communication of esoteric knowledge were developments that transpired over the course of centuries, fueled by interaction spheres that stretched across Preclassic Mesoamerica. Equally important is the fact that these

dynamics were as grounded in innovation as they were in tradition.

These observations remind me of a comment made by Wolf (1999: 274–275), who, in a wide-ranging discussion of various responses to novel sociopolitical forces throughout history, concluded that culture was always being “made and unmade (in Richard Fox's terms) as people engaged each other in diverse social, economic, and political arenas. Old ideas were rephrased to fit different circumstances, and new ideas were presented as age-old truths.”

Yet, as Wolf concluded, even though culture is “constructed in such encounters,” it is “staged, prosecuted, and resolved through the exercise of power.” I would turn one passage of Wolf's on its head, however. He argued that “an explanation based on the force of cultural symbolism alone would miss the mark if it avoided the issue of how symbolism is embedded in the dynamics of power” (Wolf 1999: 191). In my opinion, we also need to consider how power is embedded in the dynamics of symbolism, or, as I explore in the [following chapter](#), how power was embedded in Late Preclassic monumental sculpture focused on representation of the human form. In [Chapter 7](#), I explore more deeply the ways in which representation of human bodies became central to the staging and negotiation of power during the Late Preclassic period. The representations that I turn to are mostly elite ones, those of kings and courtly actors whose bodies, for the first time along the south coast, monopolized the aesthetico-political fields of possibility.

High Culture and Human Representation in Late Preclassic Mesoamerica

Figurative sculpture played a singular role in southeastern Mesoamerica during the Late Preclassic period, and much ink has been spent, with good reason, on its many innovations. In this chapter, I explore the implications of a Late Preclassic “figured world” that was dominated by the bodies of rulers, elites, and anthropomorphic deities. I begin by returning to the idea of “high culture,” considering in greater depth how elite bodies structured its sculptural expression and gave shape to a privileged realm of representation. Narrativity played a key role in the Late Preclassic high culture formula, in keeping with previous eras, but expanded to incorporate a wider range of themes and textual elements. It did so, however, in a circumscribed manner, and rulers at only the most powerful of polities appear to have wielded the privilege of erecting monuments with particular themes, images, and aesthetic sensibilities.

During the Late Preclassic period along the south coast, privilege was stipulated in sculptural terms, but the “terms” were calibrated. Certain forms of sculpture structured a hierarchical system of order governed by the region’s most powerful rulers, while other forms structured horizontal systems of signification between members of disparate urban centers. In either case, figuration in stone remained an elite privilege, one far more restricted than in previous eras. It also carried ontological repercussions: whose body was rendered in durable form mattered, of course, but so, too, did the aesthetics of *how* those bodies were rendered. The Late Preclassic period ushered in an era in which the field of aesthetic possibilities for human representation was both narrowed and refined. The mechanisms through which this was achieved, however, are less apparent. Various theoretical models – from David Wengrow’s (2001) “evolution of simplicity” to James Scott’s concept of “legibility” – lend themselves well to the unique sociohistorical

circumstances of the south coast. Utilizing them enables exploration of the ways in which human representation became a powerful tool through which sociopolitical authority was both asserted and negotiated during the Late Preclassic period.

This chapter, to once again paraphrase Wolf (1999: 8), is not about a singular event in history, some magical moment that we can pinpoint in time and space when the Late Preclassic figured world was fully realized. It is, rather, an examination of the many social and aesthetic processes that culminated in what we can, today, recognize as a distinctly Late Preclassic figured world. It is a meditation on “how particular forms of ideation arise and how some kinds of representation achieve precedence and power over others” (Wolf 1999: 33).

Late Preclassic Sculpture and High Culture

A number of years ago, in a discussion of the Late Preclassic period, David Freidel (1979: 49) noted “the presence of an elitist ethos and world view . . . which was shared by the nascent polities and served to structure their hierarchical institutions.” This elitist ethos, or “high culture,” was expressed in any number of ways, including hieroglyphic writing; demonstration of calendrical and astronomical knowledge; the deployment of monumental sculpture; the display of rare, exotic, or strategically controlled natural resources; and the carefully controlled orchestration of the built environment through architecture, monuments, plazas, pathways, and public works. Mythic narratives also played a significant role in Late Preclassic high culture, woven into the visual record by elites in order to contextualize and justify their social and political actions. Probing the interrelationships between these things – some physical and others more abstract – enables us to better understand how notions of high culture were formulated and sustained in Late Preclassic Mesoamerica.

Late Preclassic monumental sculpture constitutes a particularly expressive body of material through which we can consider how the “monopoly and deployment of social and political power” was “effected, materialized, and maintained” (Van Buren and Richards 2000: 3). But it also comes with limitations. It alludes only obliquely to the longer trajectory of social practices from which it, and a tradition of durable human representations, emerged. Van Buren and Richards (2000: 8) rightly criticized scholarship that separates objects from their larger social context, or that isolates material culture from

the matrix of human behavior in which it was created. This chapter heeds their warning and recognizes the enormous debt that Late Preclassic figuration owed to the deep social history and diverse practices of human representation in Mesoamerica. The story told in this chapter relies, then, on those told in the previous chapters, which elucidated the extent and pervasiveness of figuration throughout the centuries leading up to the Late Preclassic period.

My approach also follows Van Buren and Richards's (2000: 3) recommendation that any emphasis on elite, high culture be balanced by consideration of the "points of interaction between elites and the populations they ruled." The corpus of Late Preclassic sculpture reveals many such points of interaction, from the invocation of ancient, broadly shared myths to the employment of agricultural metaphors and references to the rhythms of daily life. I do not deny that there are also many aspects of Late Preclassic sculpture that emphasize esoteric information whose structures and content were fully intelligible to only the most educated or most privileged. These measures surely reified the boundaries of high culture. I would further qualify that, during the Late Preclassic period, high culture was not accessible to all elites in equal measure: the distribution of key types of sculpture reveals that some representational forms and themes were limited to only the most powerful rulers and the kingdoms they controlled. The boundaries of Late Preclassic high culture were at times mutable and in other cases not; but they were, regardless, repeatedly expressed through the common denominator of human representation.

In focusing on the monumental sculpture of the south coast and adjacent Guatemalan Highlands in this chapter, I do not mean to imply that other regions of Mesoamerica lacked Late Preclassic artistic programs equally dedicated to the expression of high culture ideals. In the Maya Lowlands, carved stelae made only rare appearances and preference was accorded to programs of elaborate architectural sculpture in the form of monumental stucco façades (Estrada-Belli 2011). The decoration was focused on structures that were key parts of architectural complexes, which repeated at multiple centers and had begun to function as markers of elite identity and regional authority already by the Middle Preclassic period (Doyle 2012). Sophisticated mural programs with detailed narrative compositions provided another outlet of symbolic expression for Late Preclassic rulers in the Maya Lowlands and reveal formal and iconographic overlap with stelae from southeastern Mesoamerica (Taube et al. 2010). In Oaxaca, the orthostatic carving tradition typified by the Danzantes persisted, although its focus transitioned from an emphasis on contorted bodies to one that adopted a

"glyphic formula," which referenced elite individuals at Monte Albán (Urcid and Joyce 2014: 157–158). So, too, in West Mexico (Beekman 2003), in Central Mexico (Carballo 2016), and throughout the Isthmus and Gulf Coast regions (Strauss 2018a), innovative programs of art and architecture were designed to impress, to awe, and to signal the agendas of Late Preclassic ruling elites.

The Themes and Distribution of Narrative Monuments

Chapter 6 touched on some of the central themes of Late Preclassic narrative sculpture from the south coast, which emphasizes vigorous kingly bodies (Fig. 6.2) or, in other cases, deities whose engagement with the earthly domain was facilitated by rulers (Fig. 6.3). These themes are particularly clear at the site of Izapa.¹ Graham (1982: 9) commented on the pictorial quality of Izapan-style art, with its "sometimes amazingly sophisticated creation of notational or depicted space" that reveals "a natural disposition" for "narrative scenes." Izapa Stela 5 is a case in point. Its densely packed imagery, framed with an undulating band of water at the base and a celestial panel at the top, appears to be quasi-historical in nature (Fig. 7.1). An individual wearing an early version of the trefoil "jester god" headband of rulership sits, shaded by an umbrella held by an attendant, in the lower right-hand corner of the composition. An enormous tree bisects the image, while huge zoomorphic creatures with curling snouts and toothy maws bookend it. The scene includes an array of individuals, some possessed of supernatural attributes. It is a scene of bustling activity that, in spite of its fantastic qualities, still references the actual, watery environment of Izapa, through which a number of hydraulic channels and the Río Izapa ran (Guernsey 2010, 2016).

Fundamentally economic concerns were also featured on monuments at Izapa. The industry of salt extraction, which rose to prominence along the Pacific Coast during the Late Preclassic period (Neff 2014; Neff et al. 2018), appears to be referenced on Izapa Stelae 22 and 67 (Guernsey 2016). But it is couched in mythic terms, inserted into a tale of a cosmic encounter between the Maize God and rain deities, between subsistence and the untamed forces of nature. Such themes must have resonated with many residents in the community, whose lives were organized according to a symbiotic rhythm that alternated between agricultural work and salt production. The imagery of stelae like these at Izapa moved seamlessly between allegory and pragmatism and is best understood as cosmological: it engages with pictorial accounts of



Figure 7.1 Izapa Stela 5. Photo by Richard Stewart, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives

universal order – the stuff of myth – but is equally imbued with the stuff of practicalities and subsistence.

In the Guatemalan Highlands, carved stelae from Kaminaljuyu exhibit a sustained emphasis on kings engaged in ritual (Henderson 2013). The scene on Side A of Sculpture 65 (Fig. 7.2) portrays a series of three enthroned individuals, likely rulers, flanked on either side by attendants in postures of subservience.² Its imagery anticipates later Classic period scenes like that on Piedras Negras Panel 12, which depicts a “largely performative” political encounter in which three rulers from neighboring kingdoms kneel before the Piedras Negras king as a sign of their subsidiary status (Guernsey 2018: 338; Stuart 2007). On Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 65, kingly bodies contrast with those of individuals who possess inferior rank. Although arrayed in headdresses that allude to some modicum of social status, the genuflecting subordinates lack the lavish attire of the enthroned individuals. A suite of formal and iconographic devices denotes relative social rank in this composition, from postures to accoutrement and actual seats of authority in the form of thrones. Winter (1991: 60, 72) viewed similar tactics in

ancient Mesopotamian compositions as part of a “double-play on authority”: they speak, simultaneously, to both the legitimate authority of non-royals to exercise their station and the need to acknowledge, nevertheless, the role of the ruler in granting these privileges.³

A number of these images of Late Preclassic kingly ritual referenced a very real world of objects and things. The hafted axe brandished by the protagonist (in his left hand) on Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 11 (Fig. 6.2a), for example, bears a remarkable resemblance to one recovered archaeologically from Late Preclassic Burial 1 in Mound E-III-3, which was likely the tomb of a ruler (Shook and Kidder 1952: 112; also see Miles 1965: 255 and Parsons 1986: 66). We might view the incorporation of recognizable objects and things into compositions as a continuation of earlier pictorial strategies, as evidenced at Middle Preclassic Chalcatzingo where the bromeliads included in carved scenes served to anchor largely cosmological messages in a local vernacular that referenced the immediate, natural environment (Fig. 2.15b). Even earlier, at Ojo de Agua, the imagery featured objects, like merchant bundles, that would have

been immediately recognizable to most viewers (Fig. 2.10). Such pictorial devices gained momentum during the Late Preclassic period, as in compositions like that of Izapa Stela 2 (Fig. 7.3a, b), which portrays an avian-costumed protagonist descending into a type of locally grown gourd tree whose round fruit could have

attained such plumpness only in an environment, like that of the Pacific piedmont, which receives ample rainfall (Fig. 7.3c) (Lowe et al. 1982). These devices likely facilitated what Jan Assmann (2011: 44) dubbed the “mnemotechnics of placement,” or the utilization of references to specific locations and things in order to generate and preserve collective memory.⁴

The Role of Text

As noted in the [previous chapter](#), kingly bodies accompanied by hieroglyphic texts – perhaps visualized best by Takalik Abaj Altar 48 (Fig. 7.4a) and El Baúl Stela 1 (Fig. 6.6) – were part of a growing emphasis on the expression of technologies of time and other specialized knowledge in Late Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerica (Strauss 2018a, b). Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 10 includes several hieroglyphic components in its highly narrative scene that, according to Henderson (2013: 238), portrays a primordial act of sacrifice (Fig. 5.3b).⁵ The latter part of the Late Preclassic period was also the era in which La Mojarra Stela 1, which carries the dates of AD 143 and 156, was carved (Fig. 7.5). It was pulled from the Acula River at the village of La Mojarra in Veracruz, which is located midway between Tres Zapotes and Cerro de las Mesas (Winfield Capitaine 1988). It, more fully than any other contemporaneous monument, illustrates the union between an elaborate hieroglyphic inscription and the image of a ruler, cloaked in a costume that links him to other Late Preclassic avian performers (Guernsey 2006b, 2011; Strauss 2018a). Hieroglyphic inscriptions like those at Takalik Abaj, El Baúl, Kaminaljuyu, and La

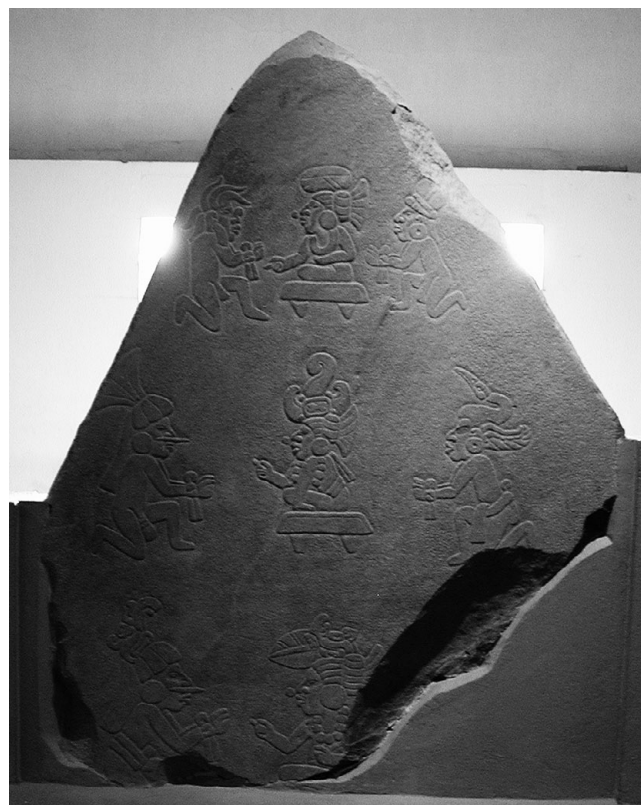


Figure 7.2 Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 65, side A. Photo by author

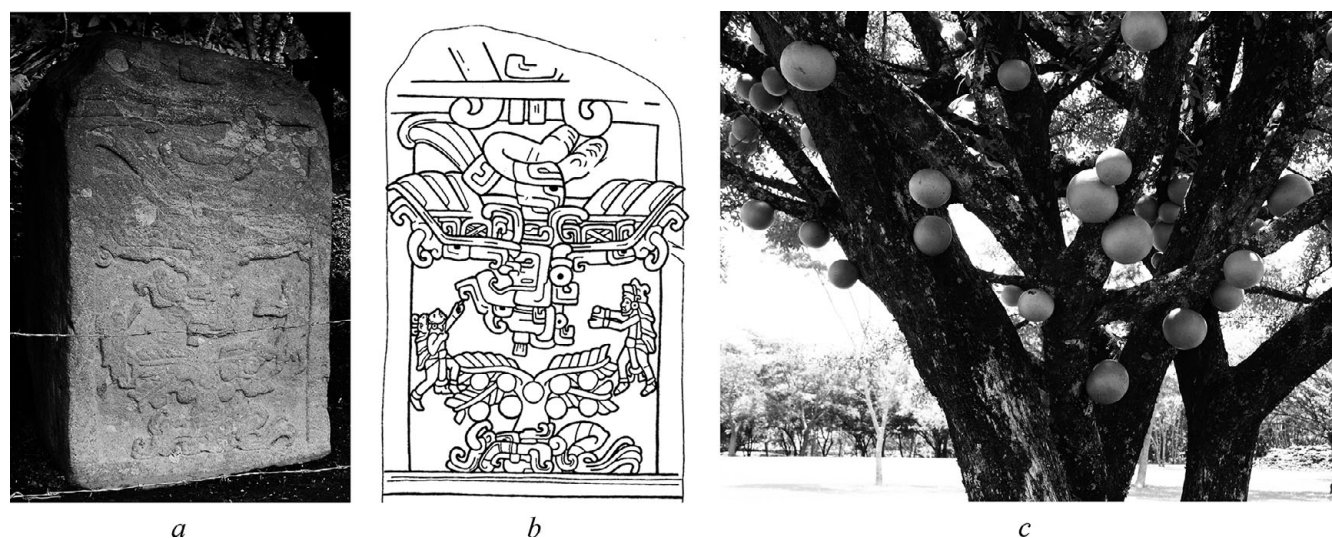


Figure 7.3 Izapa Stela 2 and references to the natural environment: (a) photo and (b) drawing of Stela 2; (c) gourd tree. Photo (a) by Michael Love; drawing (b) courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation; photo (c) by author

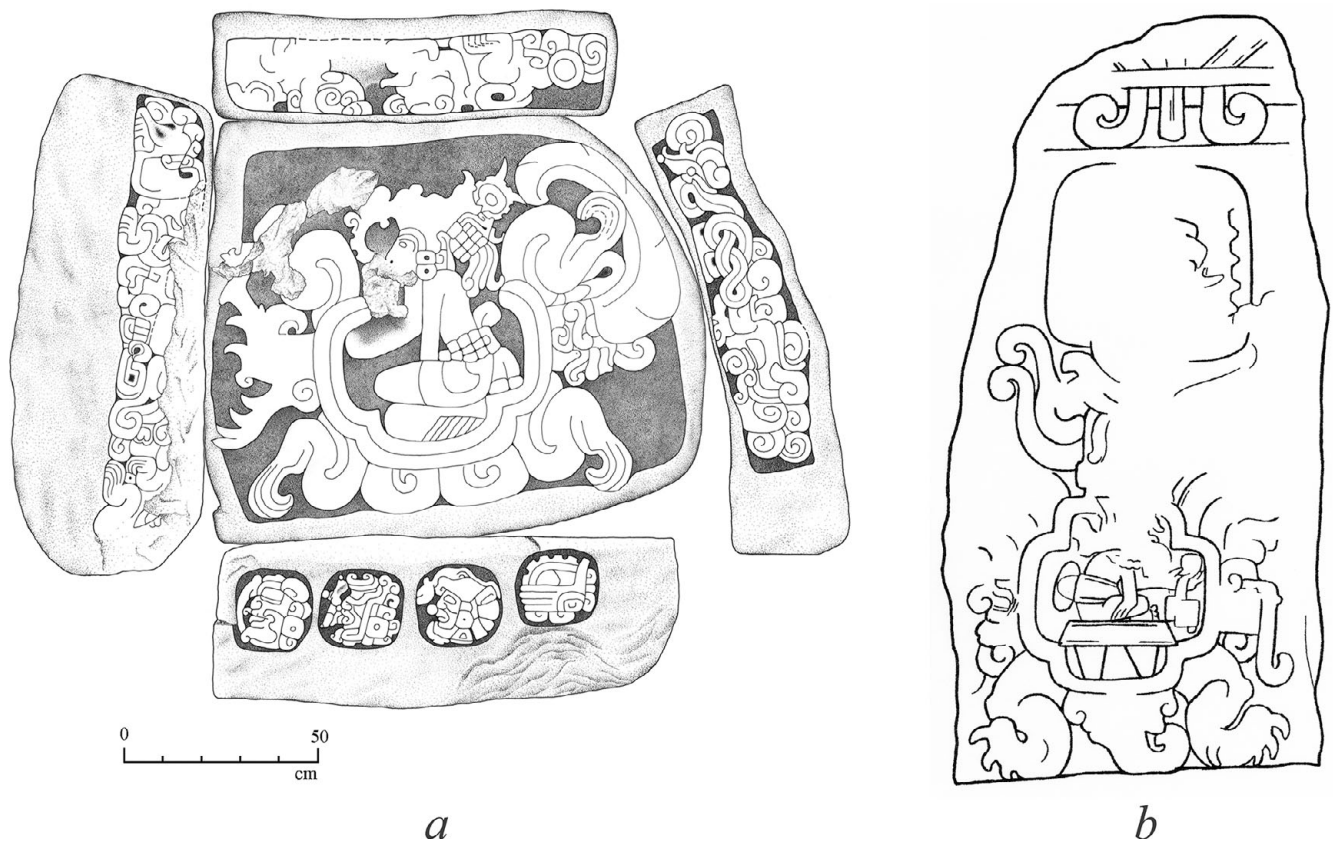


Figure 7.4 Thrones in narrative images: (a) Takalik Abaj Altar 48; (b) Izapa Stela 8. Drawing (a) courtesy of the Parque Arqueológico Nacional Tak'alik Ab'aj/Dirección General del Patrimonio Cultural y Natural, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, Guatemala; drawing (b) courtesy of the New World Archaeological Foundation

Mojarra firmly situated writing in the domain of gods and kings. Calendrical passages, in particular, engaged both with historical specificity – a particular moment in time – and with longer and much grander temporal cycles. These conventions constitute one of the more significant contributions of Late Preclassic sculpture: the envisioning of a kingly world engaged in equal measure with both the heavens and the earth, which were synchronized through a calendrical system and recorded in texts inscribed in stone.

The innovation of carving calendrical and textual statements into stone took extraordinary advantage of the planar – and often quite regularized and delimited – surfaces of stelae and altars. But text was also an integral component of three-dimensional monuments whose forms maintained the natural shape of the rock. Such is the case with Takalik Abaj Monument 11 (Fig. 7.6), where a columnar inscription cascades down the center of a boulder otherwise lacking in figural imagery beyond that of the lively glyphs, which are themselves given anthropomorphic form. On Takalik Abaj Altar 12 (Fig. 7.7), textual elements also take on a life of their own, expanding across the surface of the massive,

irregularly shaped rock. This tension between texts applied to both planar and more volumetric surfaces recalls Stewart's (1993: 8) statement that writing "unfolds in time and space" and requires a "concrete physical textuality" distinct from oral performance. By the close of the Late Preclassic period, rulers capitalized on the "concrete physical textuality" of writing that – adjacent to their own bodies, those of supernatural beings, or even free-floating in anthropomorphic form across the surface of monuments – perpetually unfolded in time and space. Writing, Stewart (1993: 31) wrote, "contaminates"; it "leaves its trace" and "promises immortality." The inscriptions carved on Late Preclassic stone monuments were immortal, in a sense, but also anchored to a political reality that was local and current. My sense is that Late Preclassic rulers and the scribes tasked with producing the sculptures recognized the enduring significance of texts carved in stone, particularly those placed adjacent to the bodies of rulers and gods whose affective presences (à la Armstrong 1971) were manifested through an "ontological fusion of spirit and matter" (Houston 2004: 291; also see Newsome 1998: 116).



Figure 7.5 La Mojarra Stela 1. Photo by Michael Love

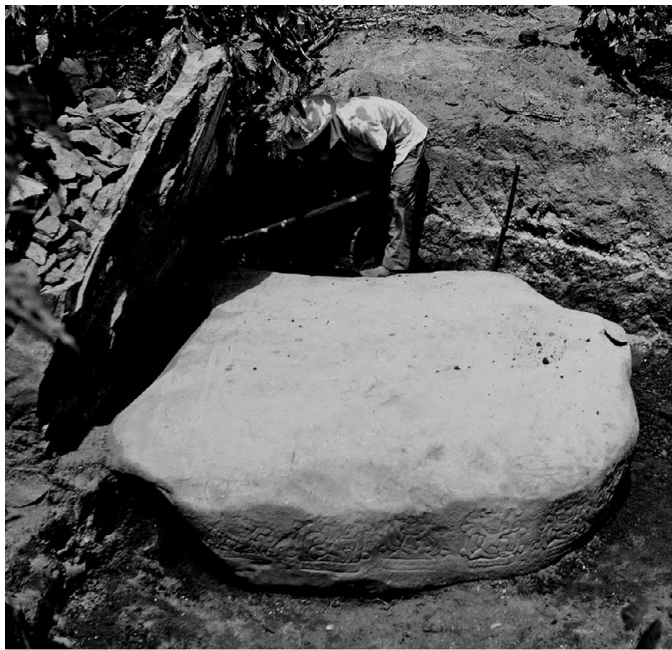


Figure 7.6 Takalik Abaj Monument 11. Photo courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project

By pairing rulers with hieroglyphic inscriptions and calendrical statements, knowledge *and* memory became a tool of ruling elites. So, too, inserting them into mythic narratives or depicting them interacting with the gods

expanded the rhetoric of rulership into primordial time (after Yoffee 2005: 294; also see Assmann 2011). Rice (2009) noted that, during the Classic period, Maya kings chose to represent themselves as “lords of time,” who possessed authority over time itself. As she further argued, however, this was not merely an esoteric or primordial realm of time, but one directly engaged with seasonality and systems of production, consumption, and distribution. Classic Maya economies, she suggested, should be thought of as “cosmopolitical economies” in which authoritative resources – including knowledge and the control of time – evolved as the basis of “Classic wealth, power, and dynastic legitimacy” (Rice 2009: 70). These mechanisms, however, were not a purely Classic-period invention. Evidence from the Late Preclassic period makes abundantly clear that rulers were already directly engaged in crafting a vocabulary of power that linked their bodies to those of gods, to the machinations of time, to esoteric realms of knowledge, and to the more practical concerns of governance and economics. As Joyce (2000b: 74) put it, “What is new about these Late Formative monuments is the explicit claims they make to history, and indeed, to a deep history, for the political elites they commemorated.” They were part of a “new intellectual domain,” Joyce argued, which emerged not during the Classic period, but during the centuries preceding it. The combination of text and image on monuments like Takalik Abaj Stela 5 (Figs. 6.5, 6.8) afforded engagement with different aspects and domains of time, with the bodies of rulers mediating between realms both synchronic and diachronic. This synthesis of rulers’ bodies, structures of time, and assertions of socioeconomic power was also translated onto portable elite objects, as with a reworked jadeite belt plaque now in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks that portrays a standing ruler in royal garb on one side and, on the other, an early inscription (Pillsbury et al. 2012: plate 19; also see Mora-Marín 2001). Such finely carved elite regalia efficiently distilled the high culture ideals of order, wealth, and legitimacy.⁶

Monuments carved with kings, gods, myths, and texts are what first come to mind when people think about the innovations and artistry of Late Preclassic sculpture. But this can be misleading. In truth, Late Preclassic monuments like these have a decidedly limited distribution (Love 2010). To date, along the Pacific Coast and in the Guatemalan Highlands, all narrative sculpture found in secure archaeological contexts comes only from first-tier sites, or those cities that served as the seats of regional authority during the Late Preclassic period.⁷ These monuments did not stand in isolation at first-tier sites, however, but were accompanied by a diverse array of other sculpture, much of which embraced more



a



b

Figure 7.7 Takalik Abaj Altar 12: (a) view of monument and glyphs on edge; (b) imagery and glyphs on the top of the monument. Photo (a) courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project; drawing (b) by Oswaldo Chinchilla

three-dimensional forms that eschewed planar surfaces and inscription. This diversity appears to have been key to the sculptural programming of many of the most powerful polities in the region. Secondary and subsidiary sites reveal a similar attention to a diversity of sculptural expression but, significantly, lack narrative monuments with their emphasis on two-dimensional pictorial planes (Guernsey 2012; Love 2010).

Such evidence suggests that there were sanctions in place governing what types of sculpture could be erected at any given center. Certain types of sculpture – pedestals, anthropomorphic altars, and potbellies, to name a few of the forms discussed below – appear to have crosscut hierarchical divisions of rank and were erected in centers of varying size and political authority during the Late Preclassic period. Some of these objects very clearly participated within larger conversations about human representation, although as I argue below, the ways in which they addressed the human form differ markedly from the more circumscribed narrative sculpture tradition. Most significantly, these disparities provide insight into the parameters that guided human representation, and the boundaries of high culture, during the Late Preclassic period.

The Diversity of Late Preclassic Sculpture

These disparities also inspire many questions. What types of Late Preclassic sculpture permeated sociopolitical

boundaries and were deemed appropriate in communities of all rank and scale? How do their messages and forms differ from the narrative monuments that were a hallmark of only the most powerful polities? What is the significance of narrative and its emphasis on two-dimensional surfaces? Did the formal qualities of Late Preclassic human representation communicate messages of relative social status or other qualitative differences?⁸ In order to address these questions, I provide an overview of Late Preclassic sculptural production in all its diversity. The sheer quantity of Late Preclassic sculpture, even limited to the south coast and adjacent Guatemalan Highlands, demands far more space than a single chapter can accommodate. But, by continuing to organize my ideas around the topic of the human form, I emphasize the ways in which sculpture defined the contours of high culture, at times benefiting from earlier representational traditions and, at others, breaking from them.

Thrones and Altars

Late Preclassic altars and thrones demonstrate a clear and sustained engagement with the human form. Less consistent, however, are the boundaries between the two sculptural forms and the taxonomic designations we use to differentiate them (Henderson 2013: 458; Kaplan 1995: 186).⁹ Even if one attempts to use “leggedness” to distinguish between the two forms – with thrones possessing legs and altars lacking them – problems arise.

For example, Henderson pointed to several legged sculptures that would ostensibly be classified as thrones but are far too diminutive to have served as functional seats. This problem is especially acute within the Late Preclassic Kaminaljuyu corpus, Henderson added, where flat-bottomed, legless “altars” are nearly identical to “thrones.”¹⁰

Comparable taxonomic difficulties extend even to two-dimensional *representations* of altars/thrones/seats on narrative monuments, where they occur in conjunction with a variety of human actors. For example, few, if any, would deny that Izapa Stela 8 portrays an individual seated on a typical Late Preclassic throne; the seat, rendered in profile with two visible legs, is enclosed within a quatrefoil emblazoned on the back of a zoomorphic creature (Fig. 7.4b). Yet, if we compare Izapa Stela 8 to Takalik Abaj Altar 48 (Fig. 7.4a), which displays a comparable scene involving an individual, again seated within a quatrefoil-shaped portal marking the back of a supernatural beast, the porous boundaries between legged thrones and non-legged seats are made clear. The figure on Altar 48 sits on a loaf-shaped object whose contours compare to any number of flat-bottomed legless “altars” that appear at Late Preclassic sites (see, for example, the altar in Fig. 7.9). Imagery like that on Takalik Abaj Altar 48 confirms that legless “altars” could serve as seats and symbolically substitute for “thrones.”

Altars or thrones were portrayed with some frequency in Late Preclassic narrative compositions, and appear on Izapa Stela 8, Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 65, El Portón Monument 10, and Takalik Abaj Stela 5 as the seats of important individuals.¹¹ These compositions remind us that thrones were “kinetic spaces” (Henderson 2013: 462): whether fully three-dimensional or pictorially rendered, the seats allude to “incomplete historic narratives that required a regal presence to complete the circuit between past and present, myth and history” (Clark 2004: 212). The significance of acts of royal seating is made explicit in Classic Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions. Sarah Jackson (2009: 79) discussed the positional verb *chum* that refers to seating and noted its appearance in accession statements that describe a ruler’s ascension to the throne of office. According to Strauss (in Guernsey and Strauss n.d.), positionals are an exceptionally fruitful class of roots in the Mayan language family: they can be derived into adjectives, nouns, or verbs, and carry deeply expressive meaning and corporeal connotations. The word *chum* encompasses the bodily act and positionality of being seated: to accede to the throne was *chumwaan ti ajawlel*, literally, “to be seated in [the] kingship.” Jackson (2009: 79) concluded that “[t]hrones, thus, not only represented a particular perk of elite status, but also

served as a materialized reminder of the ritual process through which an individual acceded to a particular office, and thus to a particular locus within a larger hierarchy.”

Three-dimensional thrones accommodated the reposing human form and, at times, also represented human actors on their carved surfaces. When illustrated two-dimensionally, thrones likewise are conceived in relationship to human bodies. This Late Preclassic entanglement between thrones and human bodies relied on far more ancient systems of meaning developed in both monumental and figurine traditions. Already at San Lorenzo, monumental stone thrones incorporated human representations (Fig. 2.1). So, too, Early Preclassic Ocos phase figurines from Mazatán, which appeared in the archaeological record during a period when other indications of social inequality emerged (Clark 1991: 21), portray individuals seated on legged stools (Fig. 3.8a). A figurine recovered from the tomb at the base of Mound E-III-3 at Kaminaljuyu, dated to c. 200 BC by Estrada de la Cerda (2017: 89–90, fig. 57), also depicts a four-legged seat upon which a human body perches. As Estrada de la Cerda recognized, the figurine parallels the imagery on Late Preclassic stone monuments at Kaminaljuyu, which also highlight the elevated social positions of those occupying the seats.

To date in southeastern Mesoamerica, actual three-dimensional Late Preclassic stone thrones have been documented only at first-tier sites including Kaminaljuyu, Izapa, Takalik Abaj, and Chalchuapa.¹² That said, *depictions* of thrones have a more extensive distribution, especially if one includes those sculpted at a miniature scale in the form of pedestal sculptures, bench figurines, and mushroom stones (as illustrated in the map in Clark et al. 2010: fig. 1.8 and discussed below). I would suggest that, while representations of seats of authority enjoyed a wide distribution, possession of the actual, three-dimensional, stone object – scaled to accommodate a human body – was a privilege enjoyed by only the most powerful polities during the Late Preclassic period. In this sense, the Late Preclassic distribution differs from that for the Early Preclassic Gulf Coast, where subsidiary sites possessed actual thrones, albeit smaller in size than those at San Lorenzo (Cyphers 1999, 2016; Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera 2006).

Several examples illustrate the variety of engagement with the human form typical of Late Preclassic thrones.¹³ Norman (1976: 254–255) noted that Izapa Throne 2 incorporates a three-dimensional anthropomorphic figure projecting from one side (Fig. 7.8).¹⁴ The face of the figure is damaged (deliberately, in Norman’s opinion); two flexed limbs are visible although also partially broken. The largest known Late Preclassic throne,



Figure 7.8 Izapa Throne 2. Photo by Michael Love

Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 10 (Fig. 5.3b), which even in fragmentary form has a width and length exceeding a meter, displays a mythic scene carved in low relief involving anthropomorphic and supernatural actors.¹⁵ Fragments of the object, which was broken anciently, were found in Late Preclassic Verbena contexts (Parsons 1986: 69). The imagery includes three characters, two large calendrical cartouches, and an additional text lightly incised onto the surface of the stone, all framed by a decorative border.¹⁶

The individuals on Sculpture 10 are engaged in some mythic act, but the hafted axe wielded by the trefoil-eyed figure referenced the very real object recovered from Mound E-III-3 and also portrayed on Sculpture 11 (Fig. 6.2a). The hieroglyphic texts of Sculpture 10 likewise contextualized the mythic scene within a calendar that was both sacred and practical; it “ferried” the actors and mythic events “to the shores of the historical present,” to borrow Christophe Helmke’s (2012: 92) words.

The surfaces of other seats at Kaminaljuyu, such as Sculptures 1 and 12, likewise portray elaborately costumed individuals (Henderson 2013: 458; Kaplan 1995: 190). Sculpture 1, a legged fragment, was found near Mound C-II-14 (Parsons 1986: 59). Sculpture 12, stylistically dated to the Late Preclassic period, was found in a Classic-period context associated with ritual offerings (see Kidder et al. 1946: 35). On Sculpture 12, two eroded figures kneel and face each other; between them is an equally effaced vertical panel that likely carried a hieroglyphic text (Parsons 1986: 61).¹⁷ This compositional device, in which individuals flank a central text, links these Kaminaljuyu monuments to others including Takalik Abaj Stela 5 (Figs. 6.5, 6.8), whose central text panel records a Long Count date of AD 126, and El Polol Altar 1 in the Maya Lowlands, which reveals a similar arrangement of forms (Parsons 1986: 61).¹⁸

A concern for presenting human actors in conjunction with textual elements also characterizes altars at



Figure 7.9 Las Conchitas Altar 1, with diminutive figure in low relief visible in lower right corner. Photo by Michael Love

Takalik Abaj. Takalik Abaj Altar 12 (Fig. 7.7) (Chinchilla 2015: fig. 6) portrays an elaborately garbed individual, perhaps with supernatural attributes, striding across a basal band. Above him stretches a sky band whose ends terminate in descending serpent heads; facing him is a smaller, secondary figure who wears an elaborate costume. Floating to either side of the protagonist, but within the main compositional field, is a stack of four, quite eroded, glyph-like elements, arranged vertically. Graham and Benson (2005: 355–357) remarked on the way that the imagery and text of Altar 12 were applied to the boulder:

The effect is much as if the basically rectangular design first had been drawn upon a large sheet of cloth, and then draped over the stone with pulling here and there to accommodate the design as much as possible to the surface of the stone, but with no great concern shown when some minor elements “disappeared” around the perimeter.

They added that the surface of the main compositional field reveals little modification and retains “deep depressions and irregularities.” Encircling the sides of the sculpture is a long, horizontally oriented band of sixteen hieroglyphic cartouches (visible in the photo in Fig. 7.7a), each of which incorporates a lively human or zoomorphic form.

Takalik Abaj Altar 12 departs rather spectacularly from more regularly shaped Late Preclassic altars like the example in Figure 7.9, or Izapa Altars 3 and 20, which are essentially round and incorporate anthropomorphic imagery into a regularized, circular compositional field (see Norman 1976: figs. 5.5, 5.9).¹⁹ It also differs from Takalik Abaj Altar 48 (Fig. 7.4a), which more closely approximates a rectangle and utilizes separate visual fields for imagery and text. While the sides of Altar 48, like those of Altar 12, contain textual elements, the

enthronement scene operates in a distinct pictorial plane. In spite of these differences, both Takalik Abaj altars portray individuals – either rulers or anthropomorphic deities – bathed in regalia and contextualized in scenes that connote their supernatural prowess. On Altar 12, the striding body of the protagonist becomes a conduit linking the terrestrial and celestial bands, or the earth to the heavens. The glyphs that surround him imbue the scene with privileged, esoteric content that would have been accessible only to the literate elite.

Secondary, tertiary, and other subsidiary sites were certainly not without altars, although they appear to have lacked ones inscribed with narrative scenes or texts. Examples from the site of Las Conchitas, a provincial center located to the west of Takalik Abaj (Love 2010: 167–170, figs. 7.13b, 7.18), portray a coatimundi, a toad, and a crab.²⁰ The fourth, however, Las Conchitas Altar 1 (Fig. 7.9), is quite distinct, and calls into question the relationship between subsidiary sites and privileges of human representation. Marking the transition from the flat top of the monument to its rounded sides is a decorative band of triangles, not unlike those of Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 12 (Parsons 1986: fig. 161) or Izapa Altar 16 (Norman 1976: fig. 5.8), as Love (2010: 168) recognized. On one side, however, is an additional element, carved in shallow relief: a tiny, quite eroded human figure in an animated posture whose right hand is raised and left one is grasping an object.

Las Conchitas Altar 1 hails from a small community that lacked monumental architecture of any kind, although it did boast a Late Preclassic residential area near where the sculptures were recovered (Love 2010: 167).²¹ Love suggested that the location of the monuments coincided with a nearby natural spring, the source of the Río San Francisco, which in turn feeds into the formidable Río Naranjo. The tiny individual on Las Conchitas Altar 1 demonstrates an interest in the human form, and a dynamic one at that, perhaps engaged in music making, dancing, or performance of some sort (Love 2010: 168).²² But its exceedingly modest size contrasts dramatically with the larger human figures on altars from primary sites, whose bodies were accompanied by a riot of contextual detail and, at times, text.

One last point lends further nuance to this consideration of human representations on Late Preclassic altars and thrones. Takalik Abaj Altar 46, discovered in a row of monuments on Structure 7, depicts two life-sized, carved human footprints (Fig. 7.10). Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2010: 194–195) noted that, if an individual stood in these footprints, they would face 112 degrees northeast of magnetic north in a position well suited to witness sunrise on the autumnal equinox. Kaminaljuyu



Figure 7.10 Takalik Abaj Altar 46. Photo by Michael Love

Sculpture 177 likewise displays two footprints, carved into the stone as though pressed “into soft clay” through someone’s sheer physical weight (Henderson 2013: 94). Footprints also make an appearance in Olmec art, as on La Venta Monument 13 (Fig. 2.12b), on a greenstone *hacha* found by locals near the site of El Manatí (Ortiz and Rodríguez 1994: fig. 5.14), and on stamps from Amatlé phase Chalcatzingo (Grove 1987: fig. 16.5a–e; R. Joyce 1998: fig. 9).²³ Footprints, as a leitmotif, persevered for millennia, even into the colonial period where they continued to function as a symbol of movement through, and presence within, a landscape (Boone 1991: 124; Henderson 2013: 94 n. 57). Elizabeth Morán (2016: 51), for example, noted that Sahagún, in Book Two of the Florentine Codex, described how celebrants partaking in calendrical celebrations during the month of Izcalli “knew the gods had arrived” when a footprint appeared in a small cake of cornmeal dough. In Mesoamerica, footprints functioned not unlike those of Buddha where, on the opposite side of the globe, they signaled an inherent physicality and presence in this world even if the actual body had disappeared (R. Joyce 1998: 156; Wenzel 2011: 273).

These monuments, whose footprints reference the human form in spite of the absence of any body, recall, to some degree, the tab figurines, which also used the human body to address absence. As discussed in Chapter 4, the tab figurines enabled viewers to “complete” the objects, to project any number of potential heads onto the form through the powers of memory and imagination. They were not only about anonymity but also about possibility. The altars with footprints exude similar potential. Although it seems reasonable to suggest that only certain individuals were permitted to stand in the place marked by those imprints, it is nevertheless likely that their hollowed contours accommodated multiple individuals who, throughout time, “completed” the composition through their physical presence. Henderson

(2013: 385) recognized that such footprints also provide insight into the expressive potential of stone for communicating complex meanings:

These stone footprints, then, in all their permanence, not only deny the hardness of stone but transform the medium into something momentary and gestural. As such, this monument represents a rather beautiful intersection between implied presence and explicit absence, seemingly marking where bodies might have been and giving weight to the emptiness they left behind.

Potbelly Monuments

The human form was frequently manifested during the Late Preclassic period by potbelly monuments, which are ubiquitous throughout southeastern Mesoamerica. They are famed for their depiction of often, but not necessarily, corpulent individuals, carved from boulders (Fig. 7.11). I argued (Guernsey 2012) that their primary meaning resides not in their corpulent bodies but in their repetitive facial features, which emphasize jowly cheeks and closed eyes with puffy lids that connect them to an iconography of ancestors.²⁴ Importantly, the facial features so characteristic of potbellies are anticipated by Early and Middle Preclassic “puffy faced” ceramic figurines found in abundance at sites like La Blanca (Fig. 4.20b) (Guernsey 2012: 131–139). Potbellies “scaled up” attributes derived from more ancient domestic ritual, in other words, which were reinvented and translated into stone in order to serve a new social agenda at the cusp of the Late Preclassic period.²⁵



Figure 7.11 Monte Alto Monument 4. Photo by author

Potbelly sculptures differ markedly from representations of ancestors found on narrative stelae, however. On El Baúl Stela 1 (Fig. 6.6), the forebear materialized by the striding ruler takes the form of a disembodied head, peering down from a rectangular cartouche encompassed by a series of curling volutes. The ancestor, like the ruler below, is rendered two-dimensionally, in profile, and incorporated into a composition that suggests a moment of revelation in which the ruler has successfully contacted the supernatural realm of his forebears. In contrast, the weighty three-dimensionality of potbellies is always paramount: they exude a heaviness of form, whether large or small in scale, an attribute reinforced through their swollen facial features. Even when they, like the ancestor on El Baúl Stela 1, appear in disembodied form, as in the case of Monte Alto Monument 10 (Fig. 7.12), their mass is consistently their most conspicuous attribute.²⁶

The formulaic nature of potbelly sculptures is underscored by their repeated appearance at numerous Late Preclassic urban centers. But this redundancy does not detract from the fact that their stony matrix and sheer monumentality were in and of themselves indicative of their significance as assertions of prestige and privilege. Although the monuments portray anonymous individuals, those individuals clearly constituted an elite class of

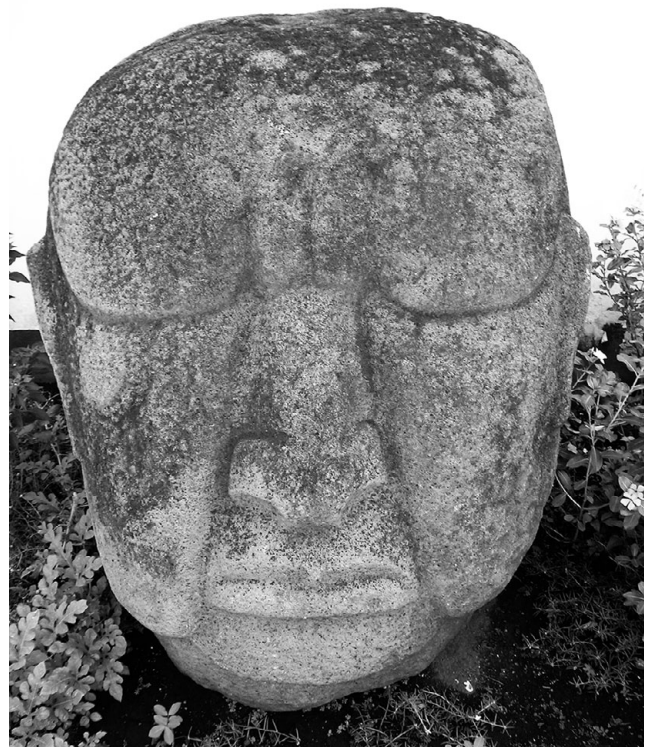


Figure 7.12 Monte Alto Monument 10. Photo by author

ancestral beings, albeit one freed from the specificities of idiosyncratic markings, nominal devices, or other references to particular lineages. Potbellies were not, in other words, part of a system of ancestor veneration focused on named individuals and genealogical descent (McAnany 1995), but part of a more amorphous “cult of the dead” characterized by anonymous individuals who, nevertheless, provided “a focus for group identity, a mechanism for the construction of group authority, and a means to control access to property rights, especially to land” (Gillespie 2000b: 474; also see Kopytoff 1971).

Because Late Preclassic communities of all scales erected potbellies in their urban centers, I argued that assertions of ancestry, in the form of potbellies, were not viewed as threatening or disruptive within the larger Late Preclassic sociopolitical hierarchy of southeastern Mesoamerica (Guernsey 2012: 149–159). Rather, they were part of a privileged sculptural vocabulary that signaled a polity’s – and its ruling elites’ – participation within larger, regional communities of ancestors, imagined or real. Perhaps most significantly for this discussion, this elite identity was signaled through a markedly corporeal rhetoric of forms.

Ancestral representations like the potbellies clearly served the needs of a growing elite class in Late Preclassic Mesoamerica and did so in a manner that was stylistically distinct from more narrative sculptural forms focused on the bodies of paramount rulers and gods (whose distribution was far more restricted). Although I would argue that most monumental sculpture during the Late Preclassic period served the needs and agendas of kings first and foremost, the potbellies demonstrate that sculpture was also deployed as a strategic vehicle for crafting an elite identity that superseded the boundaries of any one urban center or the agenda of any single individual. The potbelly form was politically astute in many ways: it articulated an elite identity founded on assertions of homogeneous ancestors, which took full advantage of long-standing representational traditions but also innovated and reinvented them. It portrayed these ancestors with minimal regalia and deprived them of a narrative framework, dates, hieroglyphic writing, and even idiosyncratic details. The potbellies fully engaged with the human form, but in no way encroached on the domain of narrative stelae, altars, and thrones, which were the hallmark of only the most powerful cities.²⁷ They emerged within the tumultuous social milieu that accompanied the transition into the Late Preclassic period and appear to have done so at the hand of ruling elites at many sites. Perhaps they served as a tool to mediate the many conflicts that surely arose in tandem with processes of urbanization, which “set in motion new forces for the dynamic construction of

identities and meaningfully changed the ways that people lived” (Love 2011b: 52).

Pedestal Sculptures

Pedestal sculptures, like the potbellies, appear at both primary and subsidiary political centers in southeastern Mesoamerica. The contexts of two at Kaminaljuyu in a late Middle Preclassic cache (Shook 1951: 240–241; also see Parsons 1986: 23) indicate that the form emerged prior to the Late Preclassic period; it also continued to be produced for centuries (Shook 1971: 74).²⁸ While many, even most, pedestal sculptures depict animals, especially monkeys, coatimundis, snakes, and felines (Fig. 7.13a) (Guernsey et al. 2017), others feature human beings (Fig. 7.13b).²⁹ A kneeling human figure crowns the top of El Portón Monument 10, for example, a pedestal sculpture from the Baja Verapaz region (Fig. 7.13c) (Fahsen 2010: fig. 10.5; Sharer and Sedat 1973: 194, fig. 6; 1987: plate 18.8). The figure’s hands rest on his knees with fingers pointing downward in a gesture much like that adopted by several potbellies and associated with ancestors (Fig. 7.11) (Guernsey 2012: 136–137). As with other pedestals, the body of this figure is quite schematically rendered, with emphasis placed on the elongated head that tapers into a long chin or beard. The apparently closed eyes with swollen lids, along with the distinctly puffy cheeks, also compare to those of potbelly monuments and are in keeping with a suite of attributes associated with ancestors (Guernsey 2012).³⁰

A pedestal sculpture illustrated by Erwin Dieseldorff (1926: plate 39, nos. 205–207) may also carry associations with ancestors (Fig. 7.13d). Half of the figure’s head is fleshed and reveals an eye with a closed, swollen lid like those of the El Portón pedestal figure and related potbelly sculptures; the other half of the figure’s face is skeletal. In this example, too, the artist took pains to render the fingers on each hand pointing downward. A pedestal sculpture photographed by Philip Drucker (Fig. 7.13a) portrays a skull topped by an undulating serpent and indicates another association between the pedestal form and the theme of skeletal humans.³¹

Although the specific identity of these individuals on the pedestals – ancestors or otherwise – eludes us, their potential status or rank may be indicated by means of the throne, stool-like base, or elevated platform upon which many of them perch. In the example documented by Dieseldorff (Fig. 7.13d), the four-legged stool/throne is particularly clear, as it is on El Portón Monument 10 (Fig. 7.13c), El Portón Monument 12 (see Sharer and Sedat 1987: fig. 18.9), Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 6 (Parsons 1986: fig. 39), and other examples. Seats, thrones, and

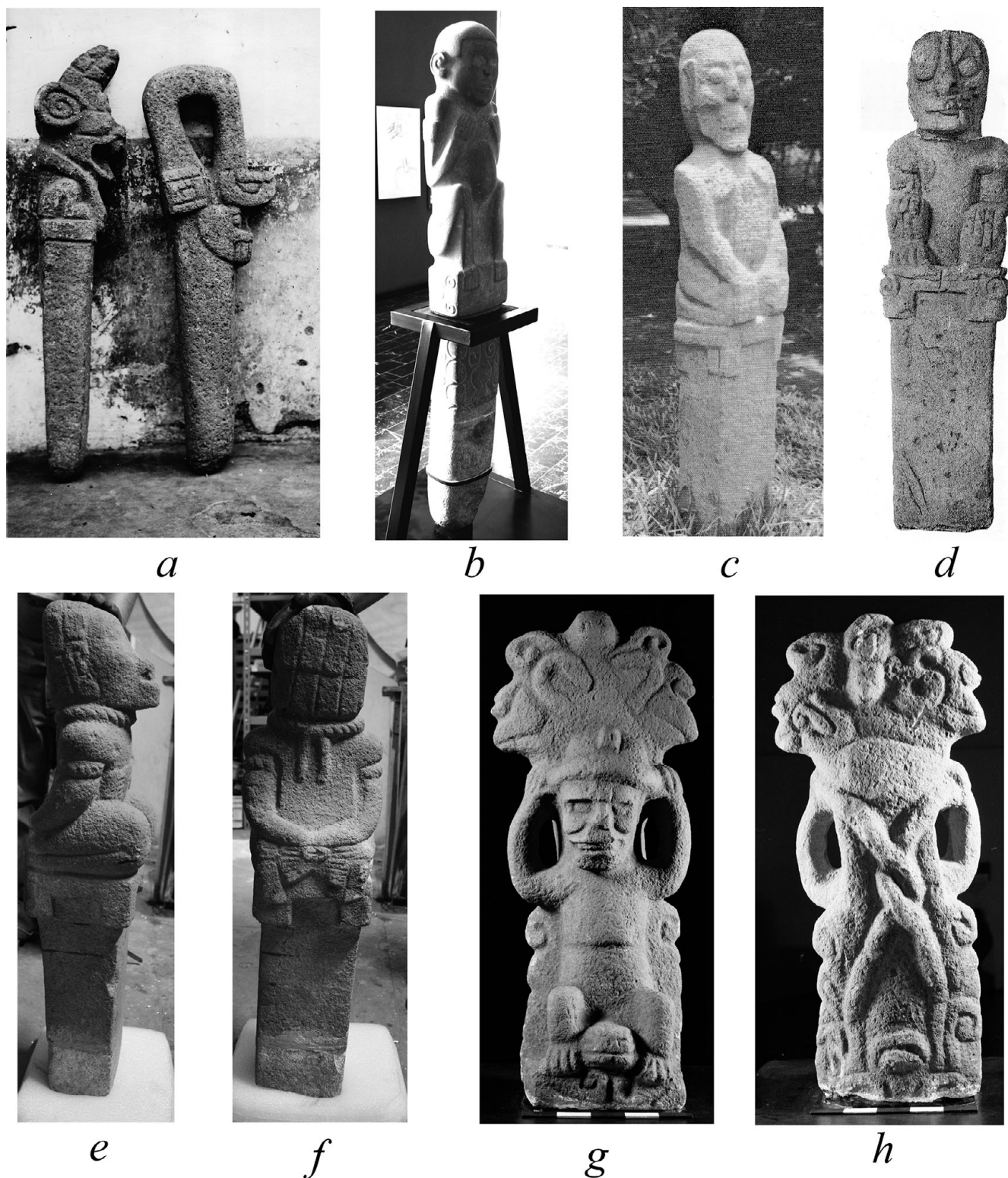


Figure 7.13 Pedestal sculptures: (a) feline and serpent/skull examples, Museo Regional de Chiapas, Tuxtla Gutierrez; (b) seated figure, Museo Regional de Chiapas, Tuxtla Gutierrez; (c) El Portón Monument 10; (d) skeletal example; (e) and (f) bound captive in Museo Nacional Guatemala, side and back views; (g) and (h) Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 194, front and back views. Photo (a) by Phillip Drucker, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives; photo (b) by Caitlin Earley; photo (c) by Edwin Shook after Parsons (1986: fig. 40); photo (d) after Dieseldorff (1926: plate 39); photos (e) and (f) by Michael Love; photos (g) and (h) courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project

platforms of a variety of sorts, as discussed above, not only physically elevated individuals but served as a marker of social status in Mesoamerica. Yet as a feline pedestal sculpture in the Museo Popol Vuh (catalog number 0599), or the coatimundi pedestals illustrated by Kidder and Samayoa (1959: fig. 10) and Seler (1901: fig. 277) make clear, such elevated and decorative platforms were not reserved solely for humans.

Further complicating the situation is the fact that humans positioned atop such elevated platforms are not necessarily portrayed in a dignified manner. A pedestal attributed to the Guatemalan Highlands, for example, portrays a figure kneeling atop a four-legged seat (Fig. 7.13e, f). His hands, bound behind his back, together with the twisted cord around his neck, suggest that he is a captive, although, as Alfred Kidder and Carlos Samayoa (1959: fig. 9) noted in the caption to their photo, whether the bound man “represents a prisoner or a sacrificial victim, or both, is not known.” Izapa Miscellaneous Monument 4 (Lowe et al. 1982: 225–226; Norman 1976: 262), an especially tall pedestal sculpture, repeats this theme. Although fragmentary, one can see what remains of the lower body of a kneeling figure whose feet dangle over the edge of the back; above them bound arms and hands are visible. The Izapa captive does not perch upon the same legged seat as in the Kidder and Samayoa illustration; instead, he kneels upon an elevated platform defined by horizontal bands.³² These representations of captives – or, at the very least, individuals who adopt a posture of subordination – suggest that some pedestal monuments transmitted distinctly political messages concerned with relative social status. Contemporaneous imagery like that on Izapa Stela 21 (Fig. 6.4) indicates that Late Preclassic artists often went to considerable lengths to communicate the social status of their prisoners, in some cases rendering them as peers of the conquering rulers rather than their social inferiors (Guernsey 2018; Norman 1976: 123).

A pedestal sculpture from Kaminaljuyu underscores the difficulties in trying to neatly summarize the conceptual domain of pedestal sculptures or the role that human figuration played within this genre of sculpture. Sculpture 194 (Fig. 7.13g, h) portrays an anthropomorphic figure in a slightly crouching posture whose sunken facial features convey agedness (Doering and Collins 2007). A tumpline passes around his forehead and twists down his back. On top of his head, as if borne as a burden and braced by his uplifted arms, is an amorphous vegetal mass with curling elements. Additional volutes rise from the base of the sculpture, and the head of a serpent projects from between the figure’s legs. The combination of these elements lends a supernatural aura to the figure, while the

tumpline alludes to agricultural or economic concerns, a theme shared by other zoomorphic pedestal sculptures (Guernsey et al. 2017).

As even this abbreviated discussion of pedestal sculptures demonstrates, it is difficult to define the parameters of their meaning; they engage with a variety of human forms that include ancestors, skeletonized individuals, captives, and others whose significance is less clear. They also, with even greater frequency, depict animals. In some instances, when portraying captives or subordinate individuals, they share content with the narrative stelae that characterized first-tier sites; other examples allude to conceptual overlap with potbelly sculptures. In yet other cases, their subject matter appears quite unique. Uniting all of the pedestals, however, is their emphasis on elevation, achieved via a vertical tenon. That said, there is great disparity in the relative height of pedestal sculptures, and a similar disparity in terms of weight, which rendered some readily portable and others less so.

Silhouette Sculptures

Silhouette sculptures constitute a distinct form most closely associated with the site of Kaminaljuyu (Fig. 7.14). Lee Allen Parsons illustrated thirteen “Silhouetted Reliefs” from that site and one from Santa Cruz Quiché in the Guatemalan Highlands (Parsons 1986: 64, fig. 165).³³ More recently, Henderson (2013) painstakingly reevaluated the inventory of silhouettes attributed to Kaminaljuyu and its environs; her list now totals fifty.³⁴ Like pedestal sculptures, silhouette sculptures possess a tenon, although the compositions of some suggest that the tenons were inserted into a horizontal surface rather than positioned vertically (Henderson 2013: 149). Parsons (1986: 64) commented on the unusual carving style of silhouette sculptures, which merges incised designs, modeled relief, and expressive outlines that are accentuated by perforated spaces (Fig. 7.14a). Silhouette sculptures appear to have a distinct visual orientation, carved only on one side, which led Henderson (2013: 149) to suggest that they were once placed in locations with limited visual access, such as in front of buildings or terraces.³⁵ Stephan de Borhegyi (1965: 17) had originally called attention to their relative portability, but Henderson cautioned that even though most of the silhouettes at Kaminaljuyu are small relative to other sculptural forms, most are nevertheless far too heavy to have been transported with ease. She also remarked on their rather delicate sensibilities, which would have made them “ill-suited to a permanent life exposed to the elements” (Henderson 2013: 149).

A number of silhouettes portray supernatural entities, often woven into ornate compositions (see, for example,

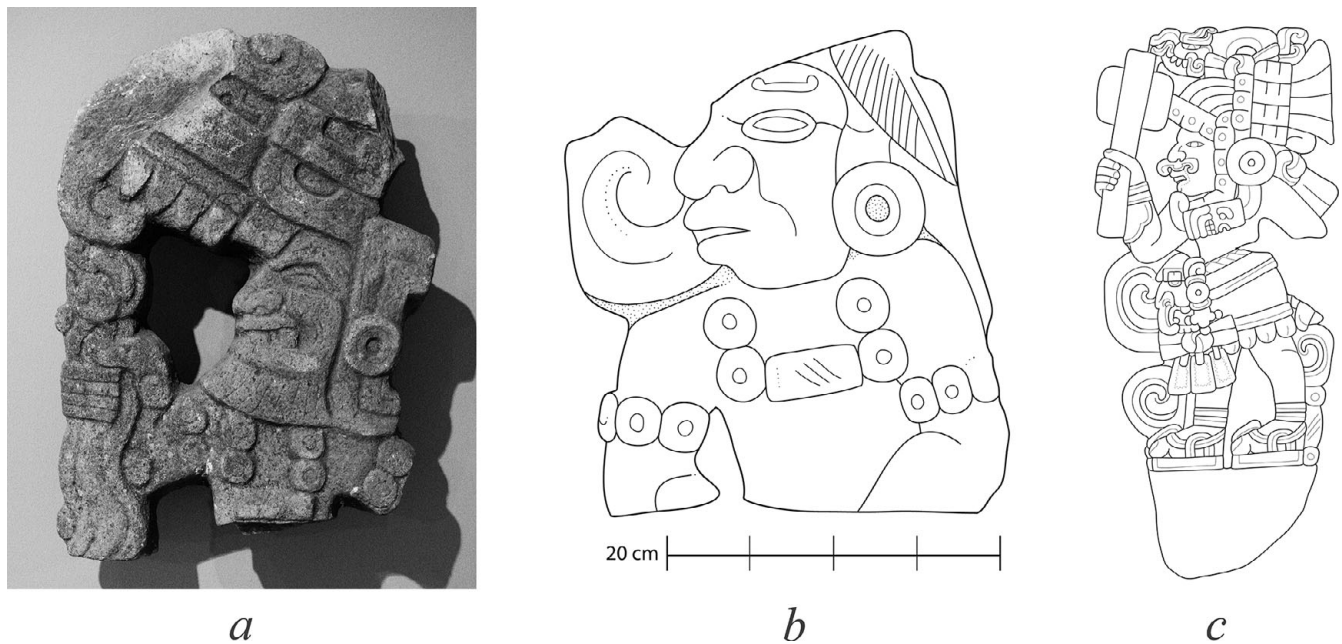


Figure 7.14 Kaminaljuyu silhouette sculptures: (a) Sculpture 179; (b) Sculpture 74; (c) Sculpture 24. Photo (a) by Michael Love; drawings (b) and (c) by Lucia R. Henderson

Henderson 2013: figs. 107, 113; Parsons 1986: figs. 164, 165), while others portray anthropomorphic characters in the act of emitting vocalizations. Henderson (2013: 152–153, 398–399, fig. 155) noted that Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 183 records the vocalization of a supernatural being or wind god, rendered as an enormous speech scroll unfurling in front of his face. On another, Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 74, an individual who wears a kingly array of jewels and beads emits a similar curling volute from his parted lips (Fig. 7.14b) (Henderson 2013: fig. 163b). On two silhouette fragments, Kaminaljuyu Sculptures 88 and 89, kingly accoutrement is also visible in the form of an elaborate sandal (Henderson 2013: fig. 20). Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 24 portrays another individual who is likely a king based on his regalia and dynamic posture (Fig. 7.14c). Henderson (2013: 429, fig. 165e) noted that scrolls emanate from his belt assemblage, which includes three jade celts, as if to indicate that the celts emitted the “clinking sound of jade.”

The lack of good archaeological context for silhouette sculptures makes any determination of their specific function impossible to ascertain. It is nevertheless clear that, like the narrative stelae and altars at first-tier sites, silhouette sculptures focus on the bodies of kings and supernaturals, often in motion, but in the form of “stone cut outs” (Henderson 2013: 153). They represent a mastery of the medium of stone and demonstrate technologically sophisticated sculpting techniques that required an enormous amount of labor to achieve, and adhere to a limited

repertoire of characters, borrowing primarily from the sector of kings, elites, and the gods.

Bench Figures and Related Sculptures

Bench figures are rather formulaic, small-scale, readily portable sculptures, usually carved from hard, polished stone, which portray rigid, blocky individuals seated on benches or thrones (Parsons 1986: 23). Both Shook (1971: 74) and Parsons noted that their distribution extends from Chiapas to El Salvador but is most concentrated in the Tecpan–Patzun–Patzicía–Chimaltenango plateau region west of the Valley of Guatemala. Fragments of bench figures have been recovered at Kaminaljuyu, one of which preserves the bench and lower body of an individual whose hands rest atop the knees of his dangling legs (Henderson 2013: 154–155, fig. 22a).

According to Parsons (1986: 23), bench figures are distinguished by “aquiline noses, beards, heavy, burly shoulders, arms cut free from a concave torso, and hands on the bench or knees. The low benches themselves are usually four-legged and either ledged or scroll-ended.” One currently in the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología in Guatemala City (Fig. 7.15) begs comparison to the Monument 10 pedestal sculpture from El Portón (Fig. 7.13c): the figures share physical attributes as well as a similar four-legged perch. In fact, as Parsons (1986: 22–23) noted, there is some obvious overlap between bench and pedestal

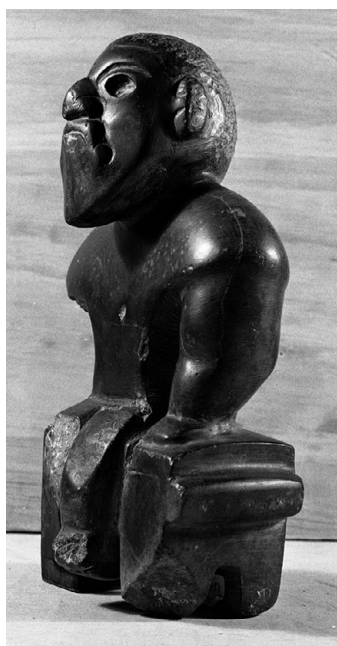


Figure 7.15 Bench figure. Photo courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project

sculptures given that both share an interest in elevated or enthroned individuals.

One bench figure from El Salvador (Parsons 1986: fig. 34) possesses a protracted belly that contrasts with the flat or concave torsos of other bench figures (compare, for example, with Parsons 1986: fig. 31). Its physique and posture recall earlier figurine traditions, like those from Mazatán, where portly individuals interpreted as village chiefs sit on benches (Clark 1991). Lesure (1999: 241; also see Rosenswig 2010: 193) argued that obesity functioned as a sign of seniority and age-related social status for Preclassic figurines. The trait clearly persisted as a signifier of elite status into the Late Preclassic period as borne out by the bench figure from El Salvador, potbelly sculptures, and representations like Monument 3 at Sin Cabezas (Parsons 1986: fig. 17, but see Guernsey 2012: 122, 170 n. 1 for discussion).

Mushroom Stones

Kuniaki Ohi and Miguel Torres (1994) provided the most exhaustive study to date of mushroom stones, so called because of the mushroom-shaped caps that form their tops (Fig. 7.16). The distribution of mushroom stones extends through the Pacific Coast and piedmont of Chiapas and Guatemala into Oaxaca, Veracruz, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and the Guatemalan Highlands (Borhegyi 1957, 1961; Ohi and Torres 1994). The bases of the stones take a variety of shapes – round, squared, tripod, and tetrapod – then rise into a shaft crowned by the mushroom cap.

Although many possess no other ornamentation, others include zoomorphic figures and humans. Most have an average height between 30 and 35 cm, although some smaller ones have been documented at Kaminaljuyu (Borhegyi 1961; Illana-Esteban 2010).

In spite of their abundance – 240 are known – only twenty-one possess good archaeological context. Ohi and Torres (1994: 32) speculated that at least one archaeologically recovered specimen from Kaminaljuyu dates to their Kaminaljuyu II phase, and a feline version was found in the richly appointed Verbena-phase Tomb I in Mound E-III-3 that Shook and Popenoe de Hatch (1999: 304) argued housed a Late Preclassic ruler. Ohi and Torres (1994: 32–33) noted that a number of mushroom stones appear to have been deliberately broken, indicating that the same patterns of breakage attributed to other classes of objects pertained to this sculptural form as well.

Carlos Illana-Esteban (2010: 372–373) noted that mushroom stones have been linked to hallucinogenic mushroom consumption; interpreted as stools, territorial markers, or molds used during the production of ceramic vessels; and linked to a suite of phallic iconography. Ohi and Torres (1994: 48) emphasized their associations with agricultural ritual, noting that most with archaeological context do not come from tombs or even urban centers, but instead fields where crops such as maize were being cultivated. Mushrooms, they asserted, are closely associated with moist surfaces and, by extension, rain, and were invoked as symbols of fecundity and abundance. The animals and figures portrayed on the stones, they suggested, symbolized supernatural patrons or alter-egos that played a role in the productivity and well-being of the agricultural process.

An array of animals appears on mushroom stones, including coatimundis, jaguars, coyotes, dogs, monkeys, deer, rabbits, and toads, as do anthropomorphic figures that are either carved from the shaft of the stones or whose bodies entirely substitute for the vertical shaft in some cases (see Fig. 7.16b). The faces rendered in low relief include skeletal visages (Ohi and Torres 1994: 153, E-1) that compare to those of Izapa Throne 3, Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 174, and Takalik Abaj Altar 28 or that also appear on pedestal monuments. Others display schematic countenances that may be human, supernatural, or zoomorphic (Ohi and Torres 1994: 158, E-15; 160, E-22). The full-figured anthropomorphic bodies rendered three-dimensionally vary considerably and take a range of postures (Ohi and Torres 1994: 161–174). Some adopt poses not unlike the potbellies, with wrap-around limbs like the example in Figure 7.16b, while others are seated cross-legged or with dangling legs like those of pedestal figures. One example

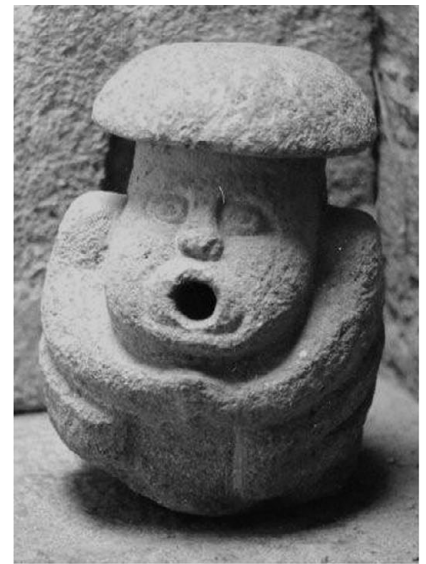
*a**b**c**d*

Figure 7.16 Mushroom stones: (a) group assembled by Stephan F. Borhegyi; (b) example in Guatemalan private collection; (c) mushroom stone–pedestal figure hybrid; (d) feline example. Photos (a), (c), and (d) courtesy of Carl de Borhegyi; photo (b) by Sergio Rodas, courtesy of Frederick Bove

in particular (Fig. 7.16c) (also see Ohi and Torres 1994: 166, F-11) could be described as a mushroom stone/bench figure hybrid: the figure sits on a bench that becomes the base of the sculpture whose top terminates in a mushroom cap.³⁶ The figure's seat compares closely to those of both pedestals and bench figures.

Mushroom stones complicate any hard and fast boundaries between categories of small-scale sculpture

during the Late Preclassic period. Some of this ambiguity may be due to the lack of information about the functions and contexts of these objects. But I believe that it also reflects an interest on the part of Late Preclassic artists in exploring the conceptual and formal overlaps between categories of objects. The sorts of discrete boundaries that we scholars might long for may have been viewed, by Late Preclassic artists, as porous frontiers, ripe for exploitation.

Identifying the people represented on mushroom stones is even more problematic, although it is clear that individuality was not paramount and physical features are generic, schematic, and repetitive. They, like figurines before them, seem to focus on types or categories of people rather than specific individuals.³⁷

Late Preclassic Sculpture, Human Representation, and Privilege

The Late Preclassic figured world comprised a multitude of objects, and this summary does not do justice to its extraordinary variability. The lack of contextual data for many of the objects, especially the portable ones, also impedes any neat *précis* of function or meaning. Nevertheless, I venture to offer several observations.

Most Late Preclassic monumental sculpture functioned as an integral feature of the urban environment. But not all Late Preclassic urban centers were created equally: stelae, altars, and thrones carved with narrative scenes of rulers or mythic characters were reserved for only the most powerful of polities, while potbellies, plain stelae, unmodified and zoomorphic altars, and other objects like pedestal sculptures and bench figures have a much wider distribution at sites of varying size. The varied distribution, I suggest, says much about the significance of two-dimensional narrative bas-relief and its role as a privileged medium for portraying the bodies and acts of kings and gods. I do not think adequate attention has been paid to this simple fact, which points to an elite appropriation, during the Late Preclassic period, of pictorial planes that availed themselves of increasingly complex images, narratives, calendrical, and textual statements. Objects with these attributes became the primary sculptural vehicles through which Late Preclassic high culture was most emphatically conveyed.

Nevertheless, these increasingly narrative sculptural modes were complemented by an assortment of three-dimensionally rendered objects of varying size. Many subsidiary communities erected potbellies, but so too did first-tier sites: one is known from Izapa, fifteen from Takalik Abaj, and at least sixteen from Kaminaljuyu (Guernsey 2012: table 4.1). The same holds true for pedestals as best as we are able to tell from the limited archaeological data. The Kaminaljuyu Mound C-III-6 cache with two pedestal sculptures included plain columnar basalt columns and Sculpture 9, itself an early example of a growing interest in the expressive potential of low relief carving. At El Portón, pedestals were also found in association with Monument 1, which bears a columnar inscription (Sharer and Sedat 1987: 49, 364). So, too,

bench figures hail from both Kaminaljuyu and other less powerful centers to the west (Parsons 1986; Shook 1971).

Linking multiple categories of Late Preclassic sculpture at sites of all scale is the leitmotif of seatedness or elevation. On bench figures, pedestals, and mushroom stones both humans and animals are elevated. Ohi and Torres's (1994) suggestion that the animals on mushroom stones symbolized supernatural patrons or alter-egos associated with agricultural productivity anticipates that made by Joyce (2003: 259) for Preclassic animal figurines, in which she argued that they represent animal spirit companions or non-material parts of the human self that were able to travel to social arenas where the physical body could not. Pedestal sculptures, bench figurines, and mushroom stones do appear to engage with some level of interplay between human and animal aspects of individuality. However, this interplay was much more circumscribed during the Late Preclassic than in earlier periods: the objects were of finely carved stone – in and of itself a marker of privilege – and imbued with references to elevated social status. Late Preclassic representations of animals, in this sense, were notably different from the animal figurines of earlier periods, which had been accessible to people from all paths of life. Late Preclassic versions were coded as elite objects through their materiality, their iconography, and their skilled crafting.

My colleagues and I (Guernsey et al. 2017) recently argued, from a somewhat different vantage point, that the menagerie of animals in the corpus of pedestal sculpture carries meanings related to social identity. In texts from later periods in Mesoamerican history, animals appear in the form of lineage names and patronyms or are used to refer to specific social classes of individuals (van Akkeren 2006, 2012: 48–50). To this day, Balam, “jaguar,” is still a common last name throughout the Maya region, as is Batz, “monkey”; Sis, “coatimundi”; and Chan, “snake.” Based on this we suggested that animals on pedestal sculptures might have served some role(s) within emerging strategies of elite identification or territorial, economic, and political control.

To my mind these small monuments, even if utilized beyond the confines of urban centers, were as focused on the rhetoric of high culture as their more massive counterparts. They, too, benefited from lessons learned from earlier traditions of figuration worked out in both stone and clay. Like earlier objects, they were concerned with the representation of fully embodied human social selves, but the cast of characters was more limited, translated into the medium of stone, and confined to the realm of elite signification. Perhaps benches, pedestals, and mushroom stones, like potbellies, served as effective tools for

crafting and articulating horizontal affiliations between elites at communities of varying rank. They did so in three-dimensional terms that, while richly communicative, were also qualitatively different from the narrative bas-relief carvings restricted to the most prominent polities.

Horizontal systems of elite signification, visualized sculpturally, functioned alongside more hierarchical ones in which prohibitions governed the erection of certain forms of sculpture. The prohibitions were less concerned with taxonomic categories – the type or form of sculpture – than with the manner through which its messages were delivered. Altars, for example, make an appearance at sites both large and small, powerful and subsidiary, as do plain stelae. But few centers erected altars or stelae elaborately carved with narrative imagery. It does not make sense to argue that those living at subsidiary sites lacked the talent to produce such monuments, that they simply preferred three-dimensional representation over two, or that they chose to eschew narrative imagery and hieroglyphic writing. Instead, I view these disparities as evidence of social control, in which the most powerful rulers were able to exploit certain sculptural aesthetics that were forbidden at subordinate centers.

By the end of the Late Preclassic period, monuments with two-dimensionally rendered narratives featuring the bodies of kings and gods, as at Takalik Abaj, El Baúl, La Mojarra, and Kaminaljuyu, began to be paired with hieroglyphic script with increasing regularity. Other forms of sculpture like bench figures or potbellies, even if focused on elite bodies, were never graced with text. Stewart (1993: 31), in her consideration of the nature of language and its relationship to the material world, opined that a lack of writing or textual information renders monuments mute. I do not think, however, that Late Preclassic monuments without texts were mute. They served many important social roles that remained salient even after the advent of writing on stone surfaces. The fact that many of these sculptural forms, like potbellies and pedestals, have a long duration suggests that their messages were not supplanted by monuments featuring hieroglyphic writing. Each served specific purposes that were vital to elite expression and its concomitant messages of social and political order.

Recognition of these variables enables us to keep at bay any insistence on overly simplistic stylistic chronologies in which it is argued that the drumbeat of two-dimensionality and text eventually overpowered three-dimensionality, or where formal experimentation is divorced from a multiregional matrix of exchange and attributed to a single region or culture. It is much more productive to view the Late Preclassic period, throughout

its duration, as an era engaged with the tensions and potentiality of sculpture in both two and three dimensions, both with and without writing. This potentiality was made possible only through the exchange of ideas, forms, and meanings that transpired over the course of centuries, in diverse mediums, and between many groups of people and regions.

Another important point emerges from this discussion. The Late Preclassic figured world was a far more strictly controlled one than during the Early and Middle Preclassic periods. Sculpture was more abundant, to be sure, but representation of the human form was far more circumscribed. In this more circumscribed world, the human body – and, in particular, the royal body – played a key role in visualizing the differences between urban centers of different rank. Differences in sculptural technique – bas relief versus carving in the round – also denoted relative privilege. If we factor in only the distribution of representations of elite bodies, we miss a subtler point: not all elite bodies were equal. The most powerful ones were rendered two-dimensionally in narrative frameworks that would, by the end of the Late Preclassic period, be paired with increasingly esoteric affirmations of authority.

Understandings of the power of human representation were not new to the Late Preclassic period, but thoroughly grounded in ancient ideas as indebted to monumental sculpture traditions as they were to figurine traditions. What was new in the Late Preclassic was the way in which these understandings were capitalized on by rulers and the scribes who carved these monuments: they clearly recognized that defining and limiting the stylistic parameters for human representation was a powerful means through which privilege was expressed. They were invoking an ancient language but amending and redefining it in the name of Late Preclassic high culture. The artistic hallmarks of Late Preclassic high culture were not so much transformations as translations. The term “translation” places emphasis on “the translators who were charged with finding idioms in the language of the current time and practices for the language of the past” (Pasztor 2005: 185).

The Ontological Repercussions of Aesthetic Choices

As I have already touched on, Late Preclassic monuments, like their predecessors in both stone and clay, often blurred the boundaries between humanity and divinity.³⁸ In fact, much as de la Fuente (1977, 1984, 1996) argued for the Early and Middle Preclassic, debating whether

Late Preclassic representations portray rulers or deities, historical figures or timeless beings, may be in vain. We are better off viewing Mesoamerican imagery as a program through which the boundaries between the human and the divine, or history and myth, could be collapsed. Gillespie (2007: 110), following the work of López Austin (1973) and Terence Turner (1988: 236), argued that myth, in ancient Mesoamerica, was more than a “merely passive device for classifying historical ‘events’ but a program for orienting social, political, ritual, and other forms of historical action.” She encouraged Mesoamericanists to view myth and history, as Jonathan Hill (1988: 5) did, as “modes of social consciousness through which people construct shared interpretive frameworks.”³⁹ Years earlier, Coe (1989) had suggested that we view the recurring slippage between the human and the divine, between history and myth in Mesoamerica, as deliberate. He further proposed that the bodies and actions of rulers, mirroring those of the gods, established a paradigm for elite, proper behavior in ancient Mesoamerica. One of the many ways this was done during the Late Preclassic, I believe, was through the development of an iconographic *and* aesthetic system in which gods and kings comported themselves in like fashion. Their equivalency was conveyed through specific and circumscribed formal properties that included two-dimensionality, narrative compositions, calligraphic details, and hieroglyphic writing.

The expressive potential of two-dimensional narrativity became, during the Late Preclassic period, an arena of exclusivity reserved for gods and kings. Erica Ehrenberg (2008; also see Wright 1998) argued along similar lines for Late Babylonian and Early Persian art. She contended that sculptors, masterful in a range of carving techniques that included both modeled and linear compositions, nevertheless chose to employ a two-dimensional style in Achaemenid palace narrative reliefs that

divorc[ed] the scenes from the reality of the three-dimensional world. Perhaps this approach was construed as an appropriate visual companion for the textual annals that lie behind the reliefs and recount that the king acts at the behest of the gods. What the king performs is thus visually as well as symbolically removed from the mundane world. The body itself is more akin to a flat-form mannequin on which is draped the royal robe and regalia. (Ehrenberg 2008: 105)

It is in the Late Preclassic sculptural corpus that we begin to see a fully formed aesthetic system that set kingly bodies apart from others, even other elite ones, most of which retained more three-dimensional form. As Strauss (2013, 2015, 2018a) phrased it, Late Preclassic images

reveal a two-dimensional flattening of the precious “material” of the kingly body onto the prepared surface of the monument. The special ontological status of rulers at the most powerful centers was, in other words, articulated in both iconographic *and* formal terms. To borrow the words of Sarah Guérin (2013: 54), Late Preclassic narrative stelae served as “visual signposts.” They “mandated a different kind of looking” and a “different set of artistic conventions” in order to define a distinct and special status for those bodies that graced their surfaces. We first see artists grappling with this in a sustained way during the Preclassic period. By the Late Preclassic, these aesthetic formulae served a sociopolitical purpose, demarcating the boundaries of high culture.

Portraiture Redux

Notwithstanding these aesthetic formulae for the presentation of kingly bodies, we might still question who, exactly, these images portrayed. Late Preclassic kingly bodies emphasize a shared system of representation, which appears to have taken precedence over individualizing features or idiosyncratic identities. I touched on this issue with regard to Olmec art in Chapter 2, but it is equally pertinent to this later material and calls to mind a number of scholars’ discussions of the tensions between “portraits” and “heroic images” in ancient art of the Old World (Baines 2007; Belting 1994; Winter 2010). Winter (2010) argued that detailed physical likeness was not perceived as essential or even desirable by Neo-Assyrian rulers, who were more concerned with communicating ideal values or attributes perceived as appropriate for rulership. Neo-Assyrian images did not present “a portrait of *the* king” but “the portrait of *a* king” (Winter 2010: 91).

It may have been essential, Winter (2010: 92) mused, for a Neo-Assyrian king’s message to remain “undiluted by personal idiosyncrasy if he is to be seen as a perfect likeness of the god.”⁴⁰ As Kantorowicz (1997: 9) put it, removal of “the imperfections of the fragile human nature” served rulers well. Winter cautioned, however, against the dangers of “hermeneutic circularity” when reflecting on the significance of representations of and for Mesopotamian rulers. She entreated scholars to remember that Neo-Assyrian rulers – much like Late Preclassic Mesoamerican ones, I would suggest – exercised some control over the production of their own images as well as those of the gods. A Neo-Assyrian king was, exclaimed Winter (2010: 92), “in a perfect position to ensure that *he* resembles the gods, if he subjects the gods’ images to the same criteria of representation as his

own!” Jerrold Cooper (2008: 269–270) phrased this slightly differently, arguing that rulers in ancient Mesopotamia

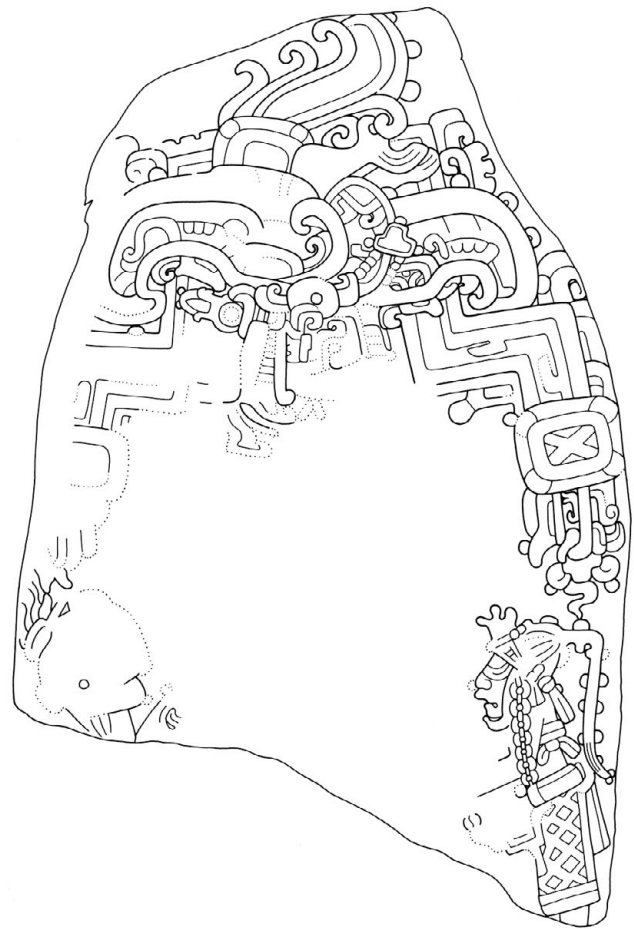
freely borrow[ed] the power and energy of their “peers,” whether these are gods, lions, elephants, or neighboring dynasts. This riot of political opportunism, in a cynical reading, or somewhat less cynically, participation in historically and culturally rich languages of power and authority, seems to be a general strategy of rule, an effort which only at some times and places resulted in divine kings.

We lack the data, especially for the Preclassic period, to stipulate exactly how much control rulers exerted in the production of their images, how concerned they and their artists were with capturing likenesses, or what the significance – or absence – of likeness implied. Nevertheless, some interesting observations can be made using the

methods of Baines, Winter, Belting, and Cooper. The Late Preclassic visual record reveals a certain fluidity between the bodies of rulers and those of gods rendered in anthropomorphic form: both were featured on stelae and altars in dynamic postures, both were inserted into mythic frameworks, and both shared components of regalia. They “borrowed freely” from each other, we might say. For instance, the body and dynamic posture of the victorious warrior on Izapa Stela 21 (Fig. 6.4) compares to that of the rain god on Izapa Stela 1 (Fig. 6.3) whose divine nature is not in question; the compositions themselves also share a similar compositional structure, with the protagonists nestled between framing bands. The same can be said of Takalik Abaj Altar 13 (Fig. 7.17) and Takalik Abaj Stela 5 (Figs. 6.5 and 6.8). Even though the center of Altar 13 is thoroughly eroded, one can discern the bilateral symmetry of the composition and deduce that, as on Stela 5, a second



a



b

Figure 7.17 Takalik Abaj Altar 13. Photo (a) courtesy of the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project; drawing (b) courtesy of Oswaldo Chinchilla

individual likely faced the figure visible at right. In both, individuals either human or divine flank a central scene or inscription. At the most powerful Late Preclassic cities, in other words, the bodies, actions, positions, and contexts of rulers mirrored those of the gods. The compositions, stylistic choices, and the iconography combined in order to communicate that Late Preclassic rulers were “twin-born,” to use, as Kantorowicz (1997: 24) did, the words of Shakespeare in describing the syncretic godhead and personhood of kings.

Late Preclassic scenes that likened rulers to gods privileged the communication of ideal values and attributes of rulership over individual identities or likenesses. The images worked to construct “*the institution of kingship*” itself, giving concrete form to underlying concepts of divinely sanctioned rule and the ideal qualities of a ruler” (Winter 2010: 95, emphasis in original). Equally significantly, these Late Preclassic compositions took extraordinary advantage of the narrative potential of flat pictorial planes. This synthesis of both symbolic *and* aesthetic criteria established a visual canon that was wielded by rulers in the most prominent cities and that differentiated them from ruling elites at subordinate centers (after Winter 2010: 94).

Yet this argument, if extended too far, loses sight of other equally salient points that force us to acknowledge the constant tensions between expression of the institution of kingship and expression of historically specific details. From its inception, monumental art in Mesoamerica engaged with the idiosyncratic.⁴¹ Although stylization predominates, it never excluded the possibility of individuating details. Mora-Marín (2018: 102) argued that there is evidence for “iconographically embedded glyphs” on several Late Preclassic monuments that might represent names or titles and would, thereby, have identified historically specific individuals. He pointed, for example, to the headdress worn by the protagonist on Izapa Stela 21 (Fig. 6.4), which includes a diminutive face with a curling cranium perched on top of a larger animal head. This potential nominal device was paired, however, with a representation whose corporeal and facial features seem, by comparison, quite generic.

A tension between timeless ideals and references to a palpable present was expressed in other ways as well. As mentioned previously, the ruler portrayed on Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 11 (Fig. 6.2a), like the supernatural being on Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 10 (Fig. 5.3b), clasps a chipped flint axe that compares to one recovered archaeologically. This intervisuality linked actual, exquisitely crafted elite objects to those wielded by individuals both human and divine in the monumental imagery at the site. The flint knife served, in other words, as both a touchstone with

reality and an expressive flourish, an object brandished deftly by both humans and gods.

Such references to a historical present were nevertheless incorporated into compositions that paid little heed to “portraiture” in the Western sense of the word. But, as Winter (2010: 88–89) wisely warned for ancient Assyria, “appearance may have also included attributes that we think of as external to the persona – headgear, clothing, accoutrements – but could to the ancient have been so inseparable from office of identity that recognition was immediate.” For Late Preclassic Mesoamerica our understandings of the ways in which identity was communicated in monumental art, whether through physiognomic details, regalia, or combinations thereof, are incomplete. To some degree, Late Preclassic images of rulers – or even more portable representations of elites like those of the bench figures – recall earlier figurine traditions in the sense that they demonstrate a similar interest in repetitive “types” or “characters” that, while adhering to a sort of template, nevertheless accommodate variation in details of costuming and adornment (Guernsey and Love 2019). The stony matrix of Late Preclassic monuments was, in many ways, especially well suited to conveying an aura of immutability in spite of idiosyncratic or historical particulars. The imagery, while on the one hand timeless and on the other imbued with more transient details, was matched by the hieroglyphic writing that graced only the most elite of monuments; texts, too, situated the acts of gods and kings in cycles of time both momentary and infinite.⁴²

High Culture and the Evolution of Simplicity

In pondering these Late Preclassic formal and iconographic innovations, through which the field of aesthetic possibilities for human representation was narrowed, I have become convinced of the value of a theoretical model known as the “evolution of simplicity.” Wengrow (2001), working with material from the Neolithic period in the ancient Near East, described the ways in which processes of emerging social complexity and the rise of an elite class were accompanied by the simplification of aesthetic labor. Although he recognized that the apparatus of state formation was rooted in increasing complexity and accompanied by “the dramaturgy of power” (Cohen 1981), other aspects of Neolithic cultural life were “divested of symbolic significance and subjected to routinization and simplification” (Wengrow 2001: 170). To his mind, this process was one in which aesthetic labor – “the whole complex of techniques, forms of knowledge and material objects through which a society

invests the concepts it lives by with sensuous and psychological force” – was “dislocated” from everyday practices and transposed “to a restricted, and politically empowered, sector of society” (Wengrow 2001: 168).

Wengrow (2001: 170) began by highlighting a point made by Baines (1994) that “the emergence of the dynastic state [in Egypt] was accompanied by the specialization and circumscription of artistic production within elite circles *and* the ‘aesthetic deprivation of the non-élite’” (emphasis in original). Arguing for a similar transfer of aesthetic labor in ancient Mesopotamia, Wengrow noted that painted pottery, in earlier years invested with social and cosmological significance, provided one of the primary material frameworks through which lasting interpersonal relationships were constructed. This changed rather dramatically by the Uruk period in the fourth millennium BC, at which point pottery became increasingly simplified, plain, and crude (Wengrow 2001: 171). He characterized this as a process of simplification that accompanied the concurrent process of state formation. Moreover, he argued, it signified

progressive abdication of the responsibility for aesthetic labour, and the political power it confers, to a restricted sector of society. That sector cultivated access to knowledge, materials (notably exotic metals and stones) and techniques of transformation which could not be reproduced in every household, but were confined to the houses of the gods, their products periodically revealed in dramaturgical activities which renewed the bond between society, the cosmos, and the political order. (Wengrow 2001: 182)

In a review of Wengrow’s (2001) essay, Yoffee (2001) noted that the concept of “simplicity” coincides nicely with James Scott’s (1998) notions of “legibility.” Scott’s premise, which concerned the modern world, was that a central goal of more recent states is “to make a society legible” so that those in power can more readily control that society. Whether labeled as “simplification” in the ancient world or “legibility” in the modern, Yoffee noted that either process resulted in the establishment of a new set of meanings “about social, political, and economic relations and events.” Even more importantly, Yoffee added, both were concerned with “who has power and how power can be got and expressed.” Key to the creation of new meanings and assertions of power were the ways in which groups of people “exploit the ambiguities of inherited forms, giving them new evaluations, or borrow other forms, and how people create new forms in response to changed circumstances” (Yoffee 2001: 768).

I would suggest that much of what I have described for Late Preclassic monumental sculpture in southeastern

Mesoamerica can be productively viewed as evidence for a similar “evolution of simplicity” or interest in increased “legibility.” The production of the human form, in great part, was gradually shifted from a widely shared social domain to that of the ruling elite. Expressive use of the human form was old hat: it had been deployed to great success at all scales and in many mediums from the Early Preclassic period onward. But during the Late Preclassic it was reinvented at the hands of ruling elites, who appropriated a domain of representation that had flourished previously in diverse social spaces. Late Preclassic human representation remained a site of experimentation and innovation, but the actors doing the experimenting and innovating contracted considerably as did the formula for determining whose body could be materialized in durable form. This shift, surely, was not absolute: representations of humans still graced some pottery, some figurines were certainly still in circulation, some monuments featured the bodies of non-elites (although often in postures of subordination or degradation), and we cannot possibly know what sort of human representations were crafted from ephemeral materials. But even with these stipulations, the Late Preclassic sculptural corpus, in all of its variety, suggests that appropriation of the domain of durable human representation became part of a system to make high culture legible (not to mention persistent and enduring).

This assertion runs the risk of painting the Late Preclassic south coast as homogenous, as if all communities and their respective rulers fell into lock step with the great march of social complexity and mutually shared systems of “legibility.” Sculptural evidence alludes to a far more variegated reality. For example, two-dimensional figuration and an increasing emphasis on the narrative potential of pictorial planes was one of the most powerful ways that sociopolitical authority was articulated at Izapa and Takalik Abaj. But elites at neighboring El Ujuxte eschewed sculpture for the most part, erecting only three uncarved altars in spite of the fact that their polity controlled a vast swath of territory and numerous subsidiary centers. Instead, elites at El Ujuxte expressed social control through an urban grid and axial alignments that were expressed architecturally. Simplicity and legibility at El Ujuxte took architectural form, manifested in a system of ordered pathways through which its citizens would have moved and been “disciplined” (Love 1999a).⁴³ Such variability speaks to the distinctive ways in which even neighboring communities chose to navigate the social dynamics of the Late Preclassic period, each devising a “legible” framework through which the structures of power were articulated.

El Ujuxte is, in fact, an excellent reminder of the danger in making any sweeping, regional characterizations.

But even with that proviso, we can conclude that the human body, through either its representation or the regulation of its movements, was central to the messaging of Late Preclassic high culture in southeastern Mesoamerica. Details, however, remain elusive. Narrative monuments, in spite of their compelling compositions, tell us very little about the ways in which social and political privilege were exercised on a daily basis. The artistic record also provides little insight into acts of potential resistance or the responses of individuals who may not have shared the views and visions promulgated by ruling elites. Again, El Ujuxte is instructive. The burial evidence there, which I described in [Chapter 6](#), suggests that even monumental architectural assertions of control may have been met with resistance. Or, at the very least, they inspired people to devise new ways in which to articulate a social identity that, while equally engaged with the human body, did so in a way less visible or openly threatening to ruling elites. This situation reminds us of the need to challenge monumental art and architectural evidence with archaeological evidence, to recognize the limited and biased nature of the “public transcripts” (after Scott 1990), which were designed to craft “simplified” and “legible” assertions of elite privilege. Although a plethora of theoretical models like those utilized throughout this chapter can be satisfyingly invoked, we should remember McAnany’s (2010: 16) warning that “the linkages between hierarchy and inequality remain untested and the ontogeny of hierarchy poorly understood.” In a book such as this, recognizing what the artistic record can tell us is as important as recognizing what it cannot.

Late Preclassic Sculpture and the Powers of Persuasion and Negotiation

What the Late Preclassic artistic record *can* tell us – and often in marvelously vivid detail – is how status and authority were visualized, how a visual rhetoric of privilege was formulated. Late Preclassic sculpture utilized monumentality, aesthetic devices, and a monopoly on human representation to structure a rhetoric of dominance. The monuments became the “dominant partners in the exchange of gaze with the human viewer,” to apply Chris Scarre’s (2007: 27) words, in the sense that they proliferated in the absence of any other durable tradition of figural representation. These developments in Late Preclassic Mesoamerica parallel other times and places, like the Ur III period in southern Mesopotamia where a close relationship between centralized political authority and artistic production resulted in rulers holding nearly “exclusive rights to public definition and expression of cultural values” (Wright 1998: 66). The assertions of

privilege and authority on Late Preclassic monuments operated on several conceptual planes: by situating the bodies of rulers in a domain of pictorial representation inhabited by gods, myths, writing, and time, the imagery was richly cosmological, as engaged with the sacred and philosophical as it was the political and practical.

For me, this situation calls to mind Lindquist’s (2008: 189) discussion of medieval society: Where was the sacred to be located? she asked. Who was to control it? And who was to have access to it? For the Late Preclassic south coast, the answers, at least as formulated by the monuments, are fairly clear: the sacred was located in urban centers and channeled by ruling elites. But the wide plazas of sites like Izapa, around which monuments were organized, presuppose an audience for whom the sacred was – at least on occasion – made accessible ([Fig. 6.1](#)). At Takalik Abaj, as well, monuments defined plaza spaces, terraces, and the paths along which people would have moved ([Fig. 7.18](#)). The accessibility of these spaces likely accommodated non-elite participation in a conceptual program that, nevertheless, made very clear where, and with whom, the sacred was located. Gathered in these



Figure 7.18 View of plaza and monument group at Takalik Abaj. Photo by author

spaces, real bodies combined with architecture and imagery to affirm that Late Preclassic society did not – could not – exist apart from gods and kings (Monaghan 2000: 31).

One might also assert that performing rituals in circumscribed plaza spaces, whose very contours formed the physical boundaries of high culture, provided some measure of control over who could claim responsibility for their outcomes. Lindquist's study of medieval monastic society again offers guidance. Drawing from Victor Turner (1960), Lindquist (2008: 199) argued that, during the Middle Ages, church authorities maintained social order by defining which spaces were "liminal" or appropriate for rituals beseeching the divine. My guess is that Late Preclassic plazas became the key spaces in which comparable rituals were performed under the watchful gaze of elites, ritual practitioners, and, most importantly, the king. I am not arguing that such things never happened in the equally enormous plazas of Early and Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica; they surely did. But during previous eras, the bodies of rulers and gods were not the only ones marshaled for ritual use. Their bodies did not monopolize the world of ritually significant figuration, but existed alongside a multitude of other bodies, crafted of clay, which were an equally vibrant part of ritual practices in spaces beyond the confines of central plazas. During the Late Preclassic period, plazas became the operative spaces in which durable representations of bodies – and then only a small subset of elite and divine ones – were employed for spiritual gain. Again, to be clear, I do not mean to suggest that rituals did not transpire in the domestic spaces of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica; archaeological and burial evidence suggests otherwise. But I do think that the rituals of kings, in plazas, were presented as qualitatively different through their imagery, their monopoly of the human form, their formal properties, and their locations, all of which combined to reify the physical contours of Late Preclassic high culture. To circle back to ideas presented in the [previous chapter](#), I also believe that these configurations of imagery and space were designed to present the sacred rituals and acts of kings as more effective and efficient. Carefully orchestrated ritual activity and imagery in centralized plazas concentrated the sacred in a controlled environment shielded from any unbridled, informal liminality that would have threatened the status quo.

Informal rituals, performed elsewhere in Late Preclassic communities, could not possibly have mustered the same level of spectacle as those performed in the plazas. And it was surely in the interest of rulers to ensure that this was the case. In reiterating, again and again, the superior nature and status of the ruler, the monuments

served as a reminder of the limitations of commoners; they underscored the wisdom of throwing in with the king.

In emphasizing the elements of control that were very clearly a part of Late Preclassic urban programming, I do not wish, however, to lose sight of other equally pertinent dynamics. Writing about the reliefs, pillars, reliquaries, and aesthetic programs of medieval monasteries, for example, Camille (1994: 73) acknowledged that they were part of "a system that engages viewers only to suppress them." But this truth was accompanied by a great irony, he maintained: those same sacred spaces also "offered a rich and complex set of symbols that probably provided more mental freedom for individuals than anything available in the squalid cities of the 'free.'" If we apply Camille's ideas to the Late Preclassic period, then what emerges is a system of meaning – expressed both iconographically and aesthetically – that defined high culture and situated its apex in only the most cosmopolitan of cities, where it both suppressed and, ironically, inspired viewers with its novel messaging and innovative sculptural forms.⁴⁴

In making these assertions, it is important to acknowledge the interpretive challenges presented by the data and the fact that my suggestions are only that: suggestions. They are based on visual evidence (inevitably skewed toward the monumental and durable), archaeological data (fragmentary and always subject to sampling error), and any number of theoretical models and heuristic devices, some more convincing than others. It is also good to remember that the visual and archaeological record of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica, much as in medieval Europe, "offers us evidence of the sorts of things that the dominant powers thought should be remembered . . . and it only betrays occasional glimpses of breakdowns in the authority . . . that bolstered them" (Lindquist 2008: 205).

That said, I would counter that Late Preclassic artistic programs do actually reveal moments of discursive penetration or glimpses of a world in which authority and status were in negotiation. The emphasis on thrones or seats of authority, for example, probably speaks as much to inherent social tensions and conflict as it does to elite privilege. Many different bodies, not just those of rulers at the most powerful polities, appear on elevated platforms in the form of bench figures, pedestal sculptures, and even mushroom stones (Figs. 7.13b–f, 7.15, and 7.16c). At Kaminaljuyu, the situation is especially revealing. Magnificently carved, three-dimensional thrones like Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 10 (Fig. 5.3b) existed alongside other examples perhaps less grand but nevertheless emblazoned with imagery (Kaplan 1995).⁴⁵ *Representations* of legged thrones, like those of Sculpture 65, also

appear (Fig. 7.2). Pedestal sculptures, bench figures, silhouette sculptures, and mushroom stones at the site further participated in the expression of “seatedness” or elevation, as did ceramic figurines, at least on occasion (Estrada de la Cerda 2017: figs. 57, 58).

The imagery of Sculpture 65 is particularly enlightening and speaks to the role that thrones could play in articulating the negotiation of political authority. Although a number of scholars have interpreted the figures arrayed on either side of the enthroned lords as captives (Fahsen 2002; Henderson 2013; Kaplan 2000: 186–191; Parsons 1986: 57–58), I think it more likely that they represent deferential individuals, who genuflect in order to demonstrate their subservience to the higher lords (Guernsey 2018). That the submissive individuals retain their headdresses, replete with unique, individuating elements, distinguishes them from other representations of victims like that on Izapa Stela 21 (Stephanie Strauss, personal communication, 2016) (Fig. 6.4). If we move beyond interpretations of the imagery as involving “rulers” and “captives,” we can begin to appreciate how the scene alludes to the complexities of Late Preclassic political negotiations, how it reflects a “double-play on authority,” or a world in which elites from subsidiary communities asserted their own social station while nevertheless acknowledging its dependence on the generosity of the more powerful regional governors (after Winter 1991: 60, 72). These issues have not been adequately explored with regard to Late Preclassic imagery, and, alas, this is not the place in which to undertake such a study.⁴⁶ But Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 65 exemplifies how reductive interpretations of the imagery preclude recognition of subtle pictorial details that speak volumes about the social matrix of rank and hierarchy, which was never stable.

While thinking through questions of dominance, negotiation, and double-plays on authority in Late Preclassic art, I happened to read Angeliki Tzanetou’s (2012) discussion of a series of supplicant plays from ancient Athens, which emphasized the city’s just and benevolent rulership in relationship to its empire. Tzanetou (2012: 28) framed Athens as a hegemonic city “in the sense of moral leadership, designed to elicit broad consent on the part of the audience with the policies of the empire.”⁴⁷ Hegemonic discourse accommodates ideological struggle, Tzanetou (2012: 28) explained:

In this sense, hegemonic discourse is at its core dialogic and dynamic, not monolithic and static. Ideology for Gramsci is primarily aimed at the dominant class and seeks to promote internal self-understanding. The subordinated classes consent to a negotiated version of

ideology in the absence of other articulated alternatives. To this effect, hegemony attempts to counter resistance by opposing or even assimilating competing voices. An important corollary of hegemony is that “it must be continually renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not all its own.”⁴⁸

On one hand, traditional messages of authority were asserted and defended through the imagery and forms of Late Preclassic sculpture. But they were also reinvented, modified, and sometimes dismissed altogether, supplanted by new forms and ideas and stylistic devices. We might think about these formal and iconographic transformations as key aspects of a language of authority that needed to assimilate competing voices. On Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 65 we see these “competing voices”: we see a “double-play on authority” in which enthroned rulers signaled their “dominance” or “hegemony” over subsidiary lords who, nevertheless, were accorded the privilege of asserting their own elevated social station. These are loaded representations, in other words, where the postures and attributes of bodies are imbued with sociopolitical implications.⁴⁹

The spaces in which most Late Preclassic sculpture was erected were implicated in these negotiations of consent. The monuments are, for the most part, quite “user friendly,” designed at a scale well suited to the human gaze and that invites proximity. Who was actually afforded such proximity to the monuments, however, is impossible to know. Gillespie (2008a: 119) argued that, during the Classic period, elites were likely allowed closer access to carved monuments, while commoners were kept at a distance; relative distance was, Gillespie suggested, a “measure of social difference or rank.” Regardless of unanswerable questions of proximity, we can hypothesize that Late Preclassic plazas accommodated, at times, an almost exegetical process of elucidating the imagery of the sculpture, which was facilitated through rituals, pageantry, and recitations. Through such performances people from all walks of life could have been folded into the “textual community,” by which I mean a community bound not by an ability to read but by an ability to internalize a suite of imagery that expressed ideas “recognized as authoritative” (following Rudolph 2011: 415). Plaza spaces and the imagery they contained engaged, suppressed, and, with their radical new programs of sculpture, likely stirred or inspired people. They both legitimated the structures of power and provided “a comprehensive vision of society,” to borrow Ringle’s (1999: 214) description of Late Preclassic lowland Maya cityscapes. They defined, following Ringle again, “the

relations between segments and paramounts” and “played a key role in recruitment and organization of the growing population.”

The plazas, monuments, and architecture of Izapa, Takalik Abaj, and Kaminaljuyu combined to create spaces where rulers and the artists they employed engaged with “the appearance of hierarchy,” and where “meditations on the center” included consideration of both privilege and *communitas* (Ringle 1999: 214). If we focus only on the exclusionary tactics of the imagery, we miss their persuasiveness, the ways in which they – in combination with the built spaces around them – spoke to forces of “growth, prosperity, and political expansion” and “provided an example of what a wealth-driven, expansionistic social order might be like” (Ringle 1999: 214–215). Jason Yaeger (2003) argued that Terminal Classic cities were more than the locus of a particular urban elite group and its agenda; they were the nexus of social and political networks that linked the city to the hinterland, rulers to community leaders. Arthur Joyce (2009: 192) concurred with Yaeger, arguing that his model enabled scholars to understand a Terminal Classic city like Xunantunich “as a symbol of a broader imagined community predicated on the existence of a Xunantunich identity.” Although Ringle and Yaeger were not focused, as I am, on sculpture or figural representation, their ideas can be mapped onto the world of Late Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerica. We see, in these Late Preclassic cities, the antecedents of what would become, during the Classic period, the very clear “production of social cohesion through a shared identity focused on the ceremonial center and its ruling dynasty” (A. Joyce 2009: 192). Yet this collective identity, articulated in the imagery, was also predicated on clear differences of rank and status; it both engaged and suppressed (Camille 1994).

Late Preclassic Sculpture and Systems of Moral Order

Late Preclassic monuments also, I believe, articulated a system of moral order. Houston (2012: 88–89) addressed the moral implications of the artistic programs or, in his words, the “beautiful things” of the Classic Maya (also see R. Joyce 2000b: 76). He argued that Mayan languages attest to concepts of beauty laden with valuation: in Yukatek, “very good” things are corporally “handsome” or “delectable” to the point of holiness; in Ch’orti’, “beauty” refers to things of use and value.⁵⁰ Notions of beauty and morality, Houston and colleagues (2010: 232–233) contended, were emphatically instantiated in the body of Classic Maya kings who, through their “beauty,” established moral authority. Moral authority

requires a “moral object,” they argued, and for the Classic Maya this moral object was the king, who not only sustains order but “necessitates a program of behavior” (Houston et al. 2010: 232).

Such ideas trace their roots deep into the Preclassic period. Late Preclassic monuments, in particular, successfully materialized a system in which rulers’ bodies became “moral objects” in great part because those bodies monopolized the figured world. Several strategies sustained the system, including explicit articulation of the role of the gods within it and the orchestration of rituals that dramatized collective values. Aesthetics also played a significant part in affirming and defining the language of moral authority: an emphasis on two-dimensional representation and highly narrative pictorial representations set the bodies of the most powerful rulers apart from all others, equated them to the gods, and inserted them into presentations that included increasingly esoteric information. The programs were more than “moralizing discourses” or advertisements of “norms of proper conduct”: they “projected the hegemonic values that governed a whole cultured world” (Wolf 1999: 278).

In thinking about this further, we might take our cue from Donald Broom (2007: 336), who suggested that one question worth asking is whether, whenever an image is found, in any part of the world, it “might be of an individual whose moral status is exemplary to those who see the image.” For Broom, morally exemplary images are intended to be seen by many people in a given community and rely on size and/or exceptional qualities to impress. Surely these characteristics describe Late Preclassic sculpture. Broom (2007: 336) further argued that exemplary images often inspire some reduction in destabilizing behavior or an increase in behavior that promotes societal stability. Utilizing Broom’s framework, I would argue that, along the Late Preclassic south coast, there was both a reduction of destabilizing behavior – the unbridled crafting of figurines – and an uptick in imagery promoting a new vision of societal stability.

Discussion

This chapter has attempted to subject the bodies of rulers and elites that came to dominate the Late Preclassic figured world of the south coast to careful consideration from a variety of angles. Their images were never intended to serve a single agenda but existed within the tangled matrix of Late Preclassic state formation and incipient urbanism. Perhaps the most significant contribution of this chapter concerns a relatively obvious point that has eluded adequate discussion previously: during

the Late Preclassic period along the south coast, the bodies of ruling elites stood, for the most part, alone. They were not competing with a multitude of other durable figural representations as they had done in previous eras. Moreover, this elite monopoly on human representation became a key tenet of Late Preclassic high culture. Monuments portraying kings persuaded through their novel forms, narrative qualities, ability to collapse the human with the divine, and cosmological focus that encompassed the mythical *and* the practical and presented it as a statement of ideal social order. In short, Late Preclassic monumental art visualized and codified a new intellectual domain that would set the tone for centuries of artistic production throughout Mesoamerica.

The strict control of the figured world can be productively framed as an “evolution in simplicity” or the means through which “increased legibility” was crafted during the Late Preclassic period. It might also be viewed as a form of “ideological condensation” (Wolf 1999: 57), through which understandings of human representation were distilled into a subset of human bodies. During the Late Preclassic period along the south coast, human representation was reorganized and reframed; it was transformed from a widely shared domain to one almost exclusively in the service of elites. It retained the conceptual web of signification that it had accrued over the centuries but concentrated it within a dramatically limited field of representational possibilities and characters.

But even in the world of kingly figuration, not all bodies were created equally. The most powerful rulers stipulated their privileged rank in carefully controlled iconographic and stylistic terms. Their bodies were flattened and applied to two-dimensional surfaces (Strauss 2013, 2015, 2018a, b), inserted into narrative frameworks and, by the latter half of the period at least, accompanied by calendrical statements and hieroglyphic texts that celebrated them as the mediators between the realms of time, history, and the gods. We would do well, in the field of Mesoamerican studies, to weight the art historical evidence equally with that from the archaeological record, to recognize imagery as equally revelatory and sensitive data points in larger discussions of the nature and complexity of the Late Preclassic period.

Late Preclassic sculpture was radical and new and innovative and, at the same time, anchored in ancient understandings of the processes and implications of representation. It capitalized on all that had come before and monopolized it to a remarkable degree. But the model I have outlined for the south coast by no means works for all of Late Preclassic Mesoamerica. In adjacent regions, like the Guatemalan Highlands, figurine use persisted alongside monumental traditions that paralleled those of the south coast. These differences are crucial to recognize even though they complicate my arguments. We need to embrace the contradictions in order to better recognize the complexities of this period in ancient Mesoamerican history.

We should also be wary of taking any of these arguments too far. Late Preclassic monumental art surely simplified and suppressed, but it also served as a point of engagement and interaction with segments of the population beyond the most powerful leaders. An excessive focus on the narrative stelae and altars that were a hallmark of the most powerful centers neglects other more widely distributed art forms – potbellies, pedestal sculptures, silhouette sculptures, bench figures, and mushroom stones – that speak to horizontal affiliations between elites at communities across the sociopolitical spectrum. So, too, overemphasis of monuments whose surfaces extol allegorical accounts of rulers and gods loses sight of those that speak just as powerfully to social negotiation, whose images attest to the possibilities of discourse penetration. All of these messages – the political, the divine, the mythic, the pragmatic, and the negotiated – were woven into the built environments of new urban centers along the south coast. They were part of a complex Late Preclassic urban strategy designed to attract people to cities, keep them there, and define their place within the social matrix.

Late Preclassic sculpture in southeastern Mesoamerica was polyphonous and polyvalent. But its divergent meanings and goals were facilitated through one tactic in particular: an appropriation of the ancient domain of human representation – with all of its meanings and affective possibilities – which was tailored to serve a new sociopolitical reality.

Epilogue

What has guided this study, in its foray through centuries of objects and images, is an emphasis on representations of the human body and an exploration of the significance of those creations. Rather than take human figuration for granted, as a reliable constant throughout the history of Mesoamerican artistic production, I posed several deceptively simple questions concerning the Preclassic period, most of which revolved around whose bodies were represented, in what mediums, and where they appeared. I also asked about which mechanisms, when some bodies stopped appearing, served to explain their disappearance. The evidence, when assembled from diverse quarters and submitted to scrutiny from a number of methodological vantage points, points to a conclusion that is perhaps not terribly surprising: human figuration became a powerful sociopolitical tool in Preclassic Mesoamerica, appropriated by elites to serve their agendas. But the ways in which this story unfolded are surprisingly convoluted and were never preordained: the south coast's history of figuration – in the broadest sense of the term, with an eye toward both stone and clay – departs from that of adjacent regions. Even neighboring communities along the Pacific piedmont embraced or eschewed figuration in unique ways throughout the Preclassic period. We do well to pay attention to these variables and to the sheer diversity of figuration, or the lack thereof.

I also argued that fragmentation of the human body reveals as much about the significance of figuration as any pristine representation. The corpus of figurines from any Preclassic site certainly suggests that personhood was, quite frequently, partible. This meaning emerges especially clearly when the evidence is situated alongside data drawn from the artistic record, the archaeological record, from script traditions, and from ethnographic and ethnohistorical sources. These data are also a reminder that to reduce patterns of fragmentation to a single meaning,

even when constrained to a single period or place or medium, likely misses the point: fragmentation, throughout the history of Mesoamerica, engaged with a spectrum of meanings and practices.

The human body could be envisioned in a staggering number of ways during the Preclassic period, fueled by a multitude of agendas, materials, and shifting historical circumstances. Yet this variability was tempered by a consistent understanding of the human body as socially constructed. This understanding did not exist only in a theoretical domain, however. It was made palpable, communicated, refined, and endlessly reconfigured through the diverse representations that were sculpted, molded, manipulated, erected, and deliberately broken throughout the duration of the Preclassic period.

The social construction of the human body in Preclassic Mesoamerica, as well as its figural expression, existed at a nexus of the physical and the spiritual, the individual and the community. This fact goes some distance in explaining not only the variety of representations in Mesoamerica but also the complex history of their waxing and waning and shifting contexts of use. The story of human representation also reveals how certain ideas were materialized and negotiated in Preclassic Mesoamerica. Pinney (2005: 265–266) urged scholars, in a discussion of materiality more generally, to stop using objects as “illustrations of something already established elsewhere” in an “‘epidemiological’ manner as specific symptoms” of something else. He asked that we, instead, ask “whether it is possible to envisage history as in part determined by struggles occurring at the level of the visual.”

This book was inspired by my belief that “struggles occurring at the level of the visual” have much to tell us about the history of Preclassic Mesoamerica. They speak to changing understandings of what it meant to render a human being in durable materials and how those considerations impacted the very ways in which human identity and, by extension, authority, were envisaged. They also speak to the ways in which human representations, both complete and fragmentary, were used to structure an individual's relationship to the community, the part to the whole. Human representations mattered a great deal within the matrices of state formation and incipient urbanism, but I do not think we should view them only through the lens of sociopolitical dynamics, or only as illustrative of those forces. They were, rather, a persistent and powerful means through which people envisioned what it meant to be human, navigated changing cultural mores, and were socialized into an understanding of their place within society and the world as a whole. As a result,

imagery sometimes challenges or runs counter to what other data sets might tell us. Recognition of this is a good reminder of why, when we throw about concepts like “state formation” or “urbanism” or “the centralization of authority,” we would do well to look at the art alongside the archaeological data. The visual, to quote Pinney (2005: 265) again, should be recognized as “an experimental zone where new possibilities and new identities” can be forged, some of which likely impacted the way things like “urbanism” or “state formation” or “the centralization of authority” looked or were configured. Human figuration in Preclassic Mesoamerica was very clearly in dialogue with other forces in history. But it was also part of an aesthetic domain that constituted history rather than just reacted to it (after Pinney 2005: 266). Preclassic representations – both small clay ones and monumental stone ones – were involved in recursive processes of “subject making object making subject” (Pinney 2005; also see R. Joyce 2003: 248). They need to be carefully considered in any discussion of the mechanisms through which Preclassic Mesoamerican notions of social order and social hierarchy were formulated and reformulated continually.

Tacking between “enduring, monumental practices” of representation and those of figurine making in Preclassic Mesoamerica enables us to understand how diverse objects were “constituted against” – and because of – each other (following Nanoglou 2009: 158). This exercise for Preclassic Mesoamerica, much as Nanoglou demonstrated for the Greek Neolithic, affords us the opportunity to contemplate the effects of different mediums on “the materialism of social action.” In Preclassic Mesoamerica, human representations, regardless of medium, scale, or context, constituted “crucial realms of non-verbal discourse” (Lindquist 2008: 12). They were also the sites and sights (to borrow Lindquist’s clever turn of phrase) of meanings that were simultaneously ancient and novel.

If we cast the Preclassic history of human representation broadly, as I have done throughout this book, we can

detect those moments when representation was inclusionary and those moments when it was far more exclusionary, put into the service of only a few. Human representations were always, regardless of medium or size, repositories of “civilizational meanings” (Baines and Yoffee 2000: 16–17). They shaped society while also responding to historically specific social pressures and imperatives (Lindquist 2008: 14). The trick, for Preclassic Mesoamerica, is in recognizing whose bodies became the locus of civilizational meanings at any given moment. If we grant that figuration was central to articulations of social identity and social power, that it was a vehicle through which any number of narratives were given concrete, plastic form, then the cessation of the figurine tradition along the south coast during the Late Preclassic period is enormously significant. It marked a moment when the most powerful rulers began to monopolize the domain of figural representation, when figuration was transformed into an exclusively elite prerogative and became a hallmark of the “official transcripts” (Scott 1990). But figuration never lost its ancient meanings. To the contrary, what we see in the Late Preclassic is the distillation of its many meanings in the bodies of kings.

Late Preclassic representations of kings were not epiphenomenal, the end result of nebulous social forces. They were solutions, vehicles through which the social responsibilities of rulers were framed and envisioned. The goals of Late Preclassic kings, to employ Baines’s (2007: 327) words, were “realized through art.” But I do not wish to end on that note. What I think to be even more important is the fact that Late Preclassic representations of kings were the beneficiaries of centuries of ontological exploration, given form through acts of figuration that transpired in many places, in many mediums, and at the hands of many people. The history of Mesoamerican figuration was not crafted in stone alone, but born out of a multimedia domain of figural experimentation to which thousands of individuals contributed throughout the course of centuries.

Notes

1 PRECLASSIC FIGURATION

- 1 Accusations of ambiguity or imprecision have been leveled against terms like “state” or “state formation” because of their inability to adequately convey the historical diversity that accompanied the rise of states around the globe (A. Smith 2003; Yoffee 2005; also see Martin 2016: 250–252 for discussion). Golden and Scherer (2013: 426) wryly noted that the terms would have held little cultural currency for the very people whose worlds we are trying to describe. Yet few would disagree that the Preclassic period witnessed, throughout its course, increased social complexity, increased urbanism, increased household differentiation, and increasingly centralized political systems (Clark 2016; Love 2016). As a result, many scholars continue to use the terms “state” and “state formation” since, in spite of their imprecision, they best capture the suite of social transformations that characterized this period in Mesoamerican history.
- 2 I choose, in this book, to use the word “Preclassic” rather than “Formative.” Both are laden with evolutionary connotations that do not do justice to the periods they describe. I find “Preclassic” to be the more rhetorically agile term, which is why I chose to use it here.
- 3 By narrowing my topic to the human form, I do a disservice to the long and fascinating history of sculptures portraying animals, supernatural creatures, or other beings that defy ready classification. It is with objects such as these that the history of figuration in Mesoamerica actually begins: the earliest known work of representational art in the New World is the mineralized sacrum of a fossil camelid, found in a Late Pleistocene bone bed in Tequixquiac, in the Basin of Mexico, which was engraved with two nostrils so that the object resembles the head of an animal (Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda 1965). Also see Shafer (1975) for figurines from the lower Pecos region of Texas that have been dated to 2000 BC, or Feldman (1991) for unbaked clay figurines in preceramic contexts in Peru.
- 4 See Pasztory (1997: 246), who wrote: “Scholars have indulged in considerable debate about whether ideology can effect or even seriously affect major socio-political and economic developments. The historical materialist position is that the causative aspects of society lie in ecology and economy and that aspects such as art and religion are secondary phenomena that merely justify and mystify these realities. The idealist position holds that ideologies can be just as causal as economics in creating cultural change, since people select even practical courses of action only if these are in line with their belief systems.”

- 5 To adopt Freedberg's (1989: xix) words, this book "takes within its purview" not only images "regarded as artistic ones" but ones that art history has often "neglected" or "left inadequately articulated."
- 6 See the entry for "sculpture" in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2016), accessed April 9, 2017. Similar connotations may be readily applicable to Mesoamerica. Boot (2006) described scenes on Classic Maya ceramic vessels that portray artisans holding instruments and include verbal expressions involving the word *pak'*, which he translated as "hand-shaping" or "to shape by hand."
- 7 For further discussion of taxonomic categories in archaeological research and particularly their inability to adequately accommodate non-Western organizational systems of thought, see Meskell (2004: 41) and Zedeño (2017).
- 8 In a similar vein, McAnany (2010: 12), following Ortner (1994: 392) and Douglas and Isherwood (1996: 13), argued that Mesoamericanists should "follow the thread of entangled social and ritual practice" in their research programs, in spite of the fact that doing so comes, sometimes, at the cost of "tidy analytical divisions."
- 9 These issues are not, of course, unique to the world of non-Western scholarship. See, for example, Lindquist's (2008: 3) discussion of the problems inherent to using the word "art" to talk about medieval objects in a pre-modern era whose production and reception were predominantly enmeshed in, and often subordinate to, powerful religious and political structures. But also see Baines (2007: 300), who lamented that emphasis on the linguistic significance of any indigenous term for art may do little to illuminate ancient understandings and, instead, serve principally as "a foil for discussion of the modern term 'art,' whose meaning itself changes."
- 10 I have tackled the issues of "public" versus "private" before (Guernsey 2012). For societies like those in ancient Mesoamerica, where politics and ritual were inextricably intertwined, teasing apart the "functions" of spaces and the objects used within them can be an exercise in frustration, if not futility. Spaces rarely served a single purpose, and our ability to ascertain when they were "private" in nature and characterized by restricted entry versus when they were "public" and characterized by unfettered access is limited by the data at hand. Most likely, Pre-classic spaces served multiple purposes, some private and some public, depending on the moment or event. The relationships between the objects used within these spaces are equally complex. Archaeology, by nature, can only truly tell us where objects wound up: it says much less about where and how they were used during their lives. For further discussion, see Redfield (1956), who popularized a paradigm, known as the Great Tradition/Little Tradition, which pitted the Great Tradition's concerns with cosmology and elite ideology against the Little Tradition's concerns with rituals of the household. Halperin (2014: 17–18) criticized the ways in which Redfield's model pitted a dynamic "culture of the reflective few" that was "at the political core and center of state life" against the static domain of the "unreflective many." McAnany (2002: 117) offered an equally salient critique of Redfield's model, which she felt conflated issues of class with those of ritual practice. The very term "Little Tradition" was contradictory, McAnany claimed, because, quantitatively speaking, far more people were actively engaged in local ritual or popular religion than in state ritual. She further argued that access to rituals held in so-called public spaces was probably severely restricted, while, conversely, domestic ritual was far more prevalent, popular, and accessible (McAnany 2002: 118). By extension, figurine use – a hallmark of "private" or "domestic" ritual – was more "public" in the sense that it was broadly shared, practiced, and accessible across socioeconomic levels. Also see Lesure (2011), Plunket (2002), and Smith (2002).
- 11 There is a long and methodologically rich intellectual history surrounding the concept of "high culture." For a representative sample of this writing, see Bourdieu (1989), Chang (1983), and DeMarrais et al. (1996).

- 12 Terms such as “elite,” which by necessity imply the existence of “non-elites” or “commoners,” merit scrutiny. The term “elite” is typically used by Mesoamericanists, following the work of George Marcus (1983), to refer to the “rich, powerful, and privileged in any society.” But, as Chase and Chase (1992: 3) argued, the term “elite” is problematically applied to certain groups based on material culture assemblages and archaeological remains in spite of the fact that “elites are not necessarily characterized by luxury goods and other items found in the archaeological record; rather, the elite would be those who managed the political, economic, social, and religious institutions.” Chase and Chase asserted that any consideration of elites must “by definition concern itself with the concepts of power and control” even though these are “abstract notions that are difficult to identify concretely in the archaeological record.” G. Marcus (1992: 292) urged Mesoamericanists to operationalize the theories of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, who, “while never focusing on the concept of elites nor on elite groups in particular, have nonetheless had the most trenchant things to say about power and status hierarchies and the practices that sustain them under varying historical circumstances.” The concept of “elites” has its limitations, he argued, but is not without utility for guiding investigations of the ways in which institutional order is constructed. We need to be less concerned with elite status markers than with the “social embeddedness” of such persons (G. Marcus 1992: 295). Like other binaries, terms like “elite” and “commoner” enable scholars to, as Webster (1992: 135) put it, “identify an important principle of comparative social organization,” despite the fact that the terms convey “nothing about the actual forms or principles of stratification and ranking.” Webster concluded that the lack of specificity implied by these terms was “felicitous” because it was in keeping with the dearth of scholarly consensus concerning the nature of social structures in ancient Mesoamerica.
- 13 These three concepts, they asserted, are at the central core of “civilization.” As Van Buren and Richards (2000: 5) explained, “[c]ivilization’ as an analytical category transcends the temporal and spatial limits of individual states. Its utility may lie in that quality, as it permits the discussion of the considerable time depth of complex societies; and its persistence may be due at least in part to the increasing interest by modern political groups in controlling the past as a strategic resource.”
- 14 Sculpture was conceptualized in tandem with the built environment in ancient Mesoamerica and was often part of a complex web – or series of “dispersive ties between ruler and ruled” – through which, to paraphrase Baines and Yoffee (1998: 254), the themes of order, wealth, and legitimacy were interwoven into civilization’s fabric.
- 15 My use of the term “ideology” should be clarified, if for no other reason than to avoid accusations of “semantic sloppiness” (Clark 1996: 52). Sharer and Ashmore (1987: 406) viewed ideology as encompassing “the belief and value system of a society” including “art styles and other symbolic records” that “provide information about the ways human groups have codified their outlook on existence.” Ideology is expressed through religious beliefs, value systems, politics, and symbolic systems (Demarest 1992: 4). It is also critical to expressions of social order (Baines and Yoffee 2000: 14). It constitutes, DeMarrais et al. (1996: 16) concluded, “as much the material means to communicate and manipulate ideas as it is the ideas themselves”; it has, in other words, “both a material and a symbolic component.” It is not static, and its materialization is a process undertaken “in conjunction with other strategies” (DeMarrais et al. 1996: 68). Even speaking of ideology in the singular is misleading: Brumfiel (1996: 49) and Inomata (2001: 324) reminded us that Mesoamerican societies, like others, expressed multiple ideologies, and that “their relations to particular classes may not always be clear-cut.”
- 16 Also see Gillespie (2008b: 129) and Houston et al. (2006: 130).

- 17 I am indebted here to Renfrew's (2007a: 123–124) discussion of Ovid's *The Metamorphoses* and issues of "presence" in monumental sculpture.
- 18 Different authors use different spellings of the word *winik*. See Macri andLooper (2003: 201) for discussion.
- 19 Houston and Stuart linked these ideas to those of later Postclassic groups in Central Mexico, who believed that a divine energy, *teotl*, could be manifested in *teixiptla*, "the physical representation or incarnation of the *teotl*" (Boone 1989: 4).
- 20 In a more recent discussion, Jackson (2017: 584) addressed the emphasis on "person-like characteristics or capabilities" in these arguments, which invited criticism from scholars like Holbraad (2009: 434), who argued that ontological possibilities beyond those of personhood are important to consider. Yet, as Jackson (2017: 584 n. 4, citing a personal communication from Linda Brown; see Brown and Walker 2008) preemptively countered, evidence from Classic Maya hieroglyphic texts makes clear that "agentive objects, or non-human agents, were explicitly treated in ways that underscored their human-like needs." Framing objects as "person-like," Jackson concluded, is in keeping with "what we currently know about Classic Maya object concepts." Also see Hendon (2012: 88), who concluded that Mesoamerican philosophies make clear that "human beings are not alone in possessing socially determined and validated identities, agency, or the capacity to enter into relationships." Hendon further argued that such fundamental Mesoamerican notions can be put into productive dialogue with "anthropological theories of the relational self, distributed personhood, and objectification."
- 21 The lineage of these arguments, especially within the field of art history, is important to note: Kubler's ideas were indebted to both Erwin Panofsky (1955) and Henri Focillon (Focillon et al. 1942), who cautioned that visible forms repeated through time might acquire different meanings or, conversely, that enduring meanings might take new visual forms.
- 22 Willey's assertions benefited from the foundational research of Paul Kirchhoff (1943), who had argued that Mesoamerica could be viewed as a unified cultural tradition because of an enduring suite of shared cultural practices.
- 23 For the merits of the direct historical approach, see Houston and Taube (2000: 290–291 n. 5). For a critique of its methods and assumptions, see Fogelin (2007: 58), who cautioned against any "convenient research strategy" that benefits from assuming stability of meaning over time.
- 24 For a recent and thoughtful meditation on representation and its significance – from constituting a "mental act" to "plastic imitation" – see Houston (2014: 54–56), whose discussion also addresses issues of mimesis, simulacrum, and skeuomorphism.
- 25 At the time of the Spanish conquest, Nahuas were the largest cultural-linguistic group in Mesoamerica; their language, Nahuatl, was the language of the Aztecs (Mexico) and spoken throughout central Mexico (McDonough 2014: 5).
- 26 Many of the problems that Dean (2006) addressed with regard to the term "art" in non-Western societies extend to the designation of "artist" as well. Hieroglyphically attested terms for describing the individuals charged with sculpting, crafting, modeling, and chiseling representations of humans pertain only to the Classic or later periods. Working with Classic Maya material, Houston (2016: 424 n. 1) chose to use the terms "artist" and "artisan" interchangeably, with the "target meaning" being "a skilled maker motivated by aesthetic guidelines." I follow his lead in this book.
- 27 Mendelsohn (2017: 20–22), for example, noted how ill-suited the term "Proto-classic," which came into use due to a "ceramic conundrum," is for demarcating the temporal limits of social change. It pays, she concluded, greater attention to "pots (ceramic attributes) than people (social processes)." For further discussion, see Daneels (2005: 455); compare with Inomata and Henderson (2016).

2 MONUMENTAL SCULPTURE AND THE HUMAN FORM DURING THE EARLY AND MIDDLE PRECLASSIC PERIODS

- 1 See, for example, the following essays, books, and edited volumes by Benson (1996), Bernal (1969), Clewlow (1974), Coe (1965a), Coe and Diehl (1980), Cyphers (2004), de la Fuente (1973, 1977, 1981, 1984, 1996), González Lauck (2010), Grove (1984), Guernsey et al. (2010), Milbrath (1979), Miles (1965), Parsons (1986), Princeton (1995), Stirling (1943, 1955, 1965), and Uriarte and González Lauck (2008).
- 2 In this sense, Meyers (2012: 7–8) explained, *monumentum* is “interactive” and fluid, necessarily intertwined with individual viewership and experience. Its very nature precludes any singular or finite meaning. The term, for ancient Romans, conjured stability and durability, according to Meyers, who suggested an antonym might be “ephemeral.” But see Carpo (2007) for the “onomasiological discomfort” of the “ideologically loaded” term “monument” in the postmodern world.
- 3 Workshops dedicated to the recarving of monuments at the Olmec site of San Lorenzo were “‘attached’ both physically and socially to elite patrons,” according to Cyphers (1999: 165–168). For at least a portion of San Lorenzo’s history, individuals at the nearby center of Laguna de los Cerros appear to have controlled the dispersal of the stone, which came from the Tuxtla Mountains (Coe and Diehl 1980; Gillespie 1994, 2000a: 111; Williams and Heizer 1965). The stone was initially pre-formed by sculptors at the Llano de Jícara workshop, located 7 km northwest of Laguna de los Cerros, before being transported to San Lorenzo where its final carving ensued (Gillespie 1994; Medellín Zenil 1960). This evidence points to the inherent value of the stone itself, as Gillespie (2000a: 112) noted.
- 4 A workshop under elite control at the site of San Lorenzo contained polishing tools, drill bits, and many thousands of drill bearings made of ilmenite from the southern isthmus (Cyphers and Di Castro 1996). The spent ilmenite bearings were not discarded amid other refuse from the workshop but stored in underground pits, which “deterred their capture and re-utilization for the illegitimate production of imitation high-status objects, whose uncontrolled circulation could have undermined the perception of the social order” (Cyphers 2014: 1015). Even once a monument had “outlived” its usefulness, Cyphers noted, it was “destined for recycling” undoubtedly due to stone’s inherent value as a non-local resource with high transportation costs. Cyphers (1999: 168) noted that similar dynamics were documented at the household level: grinding and pounding stones were “systematically reused and fragments hoarded” in “most households excavated on the [San Lorenzo] plateau.” For discussion of Olmec monuments recarved into new forms, see Porter (1990). See Gillespie (1994, 2000a) for Laguna de los Cerros and Llano de Jícara and their fluctuating relationships to San Lorenzo and other Gulf Coast centers, including La Venta.
- 5 The sheer number of Preclassic monuments from the Gulf Coast region accommodated any number of themes. De la Fuente (1994: 209) estimated that there were more than 250 monumental sculptures from southern Veracruz and western Tabasco, not to mention others sprinkled throughout other regions of Preclassic Mesoamerica; her number did not include smaller non-monumental sculptures (*de tamaño reducido*, as she phrased it). Recent excavations like those by Cyphers (2004) have only served to raise this number and shed increasing light on the diversity of expression at this early date.
- 6 De la Fuente (1996: 46) phrased this slightly differently, yet equally poetically, elsewhere: “It is, in synthesis, the human form in which divine power has a seat.” Following in a similar vein, Tate (2012: 32) wrote that “as practitioners or scholars of non-Western religions can attest, not all belief systems construe the sacred as extrinsic to human nature.” Such ideas call to mind Freedberg’s (1989:

- 60) assertion that “[i]n order to grasp the divinity, man must figure it, and the only appropriate figure he knows is that of man himself,” or Stewart’s (1993: 125) recognition that “[a]nthropomorphism, for example, tells us much more about the shape of the human body than it tells us about an animal other.”
- 7 Cyphers noted, however, the significant social and economic developments that preceded this period, in full swing by 1800 BC.
 - 8 Grove (1973) convincingly argued that Olmec tabletop “altars” actually served as thrones based, in part, on comparison to the Oxtotitlan mural (Grove 1970), which portrays an individual perched on an object that compares closely to the tabletop altars. Nevertheless, because the objects were first labeled in the literature as “altars,” this taxonomic classification endures in the literature. Cyphers (1999, 2016: 109–110; Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera 2006; also see Gillespie 2000a) recognized that certain types of monuments – stone thrones in particular – were especially potent symbols of relative political authority. The larger-than-life scale at which the presumed ruler, in the niche on San Lorenzo Monument 14, is rendered correlates with the sheer size of the throne itself; mere mortals are diminished in the presence of this sculpture. By contrast, at nearby Laguna de los Cerros, both the size of the throne and the individual who emerges from its niche are markedly smaller (see Cyphers 2016: fig. 4.9; Gillespie 2000a: fig. 8). At other subsidiary centers like Loma del Zapote and Estero Rabón, thrones are also significantly smaller and lack the prominent niche (Cyphers 2016: fig. 4.9). Relative scale is telling, as is the absence of any representation of a ruler. At Loma del Zapote, the bodies portrayed are those of diminutive individuals who, like caryatids from Classical antiquity, support the entablature-like top of the throne above them. The overall distribution of large-scale, Early Preclassic Olmec sculpture also mirrored regional hierarchies. While the Olmec capital of San Lorenzo has an inventory of 129 stone monuments, lesser centers surrounding it have significantly fewer (between 8 and 15).
 - 9 See Clewlow et al. (1967), Coe (1965b: 733; 1977: 186), Grove (1981: 65–67), Stirling (1955: 20), and Wicke (1971). Tate (2012: 253) provided a very useful summary of the various interpretations of the colossal heads and their principal proponents.
 - 10 See, for example, the disembodied carved stone heads at Middle Preclassic La Venta (González Lauck 2010; Reilly 1999: 29) and Late Preclassic Monte Alto (Guernsey 2012). There is a wealth of scholarship devoted to the topic of disembodied heads and their significance. See, for example, Blomster (2011: 126), Gossen (1974: 35–36), Guernsey (2012), Hoopes and Mora-Marín (2009: 312–313), Houston and Stuart (1998), Joyce (1998: 160–161), López-Austin (1988: 170–171), and Tozzer (1941: 131). Tate (1993: 15) pointed to the numerous representations throughout Mesoamerica that focus on “images of the head or face alone” and related them to ethnographic descriptions of modern Maya rituals recorded by Gossen (1974: 35–36) in which the carved heads and faces of saints “receive a great amount of attention in ritual action and symbolism, the reason being that the head is the source of heat and power.”
 - 11 Pool (2007: 108) observed that “[f]rom the inception of their monumental tradition, the Olmecs selected the hard, tough basalts of the Tuxtla mountains for the vast majority of sculptures. In this they stand in contrast to the Classic Maya, whose elaborate stelae and altars were generally carved from much softer limestone and volcanic tuffs. Local sandstone also was used for Early and Middle Formative Olmec monuments, but with much less frequency.”
 - 12 Milbrath (1979: 33) had previously observed that Olmec colossal heads were at times portrayed “with parted lips revealing their teeth.”
 - 13 De la Fuente (1996: 49) characterized these figures as “priests” or “mediators” whose “rank was indicated by the attributes they wore, not by their particular physical appearance” and who must have “participated in a significant hierarchical situation in their community.”

- 14 De la Fuente (1984: 153) asserted that the diminutive individuals on San Lorenzo Monument 18 bear feline features and differ from the strictly human ones on Loma del Zapote Monument 2.
- 15 San Lorenzo Monument 34, while clearly conceived in the round, also reveals details that indicate a preference for a certain viewpoint, in this case focused on the front. Milbrath (1979: 9) observed, for example, that “the body modeling is more elaborate in the frontal view; this is particularly notable when comparing the roundly modeled left foot, with its delicate toenails and anklebone, to the flattened right foot folded along the buttocks.”
- 16 Clancy (1990: 25) referred to compositions that extended to the sides of monuments as “wrap-around fields” that accommodated the uninterrupted flow of imagery beyond a single pictorial plane.
- 17 Also see Loma del Zapote Monument 3 (Cyphers 2004: fig. 156).
- 18 Human–animal encounters, sometimes of fairly high drama, constitute a significant theme in the corpus of Early Preclassic Gulf Coast sculpture. However, this theme would wane in importance in later periods. It is also worth noting that sculpture was not the only – nor the most amenable – medium for narrative experimentation during the Early Preclassic, as evidence from the central Mexican highlands makes clear. A recent publication by Russ and colleagues (2017) claimed a date between 1520 and 1410 BC for Panel C-2 at Oxtotitlan cave, in Guerrero, Mexico, which is part of what Grove (1970) suggested was a purposeful grouping of multiple paintings in the North Grotto. Panel C-2 pre-dates the more famous Mural 1 (or Panel C-1 in their classificatory scheme) and indicates that “polychrome paint technology and complex figurative scenes in pictographs” pre-date “intensive human-built ceremonial complexes in Guerrero or the Gulf Coast regions” (Russ et al. 2017: 11). Discernible, even amid the considerable paint loss of Panel C-2, are the spots of a feline pelt, which link it to monuments in the San Lorenzo region that likewise featured felines as key protagonists alongside human actors. If, indeed, Panel C-2 is part of the larger complex of imagery in the North Grotto as Grove (1970) suggested, then it is also important to note that the feline motif was integrated into a composition that included anthropomorphic actors.
- 19 Coe (1968: 63) elaborated on the methods of destruction, describing “axe-grinding marks, outright smashing off of great chunks and flakes, and on the sides of the niche-type altars, the cutting out of oblong slots.”
- 20 Ortiz and Rodríguez (2000) linked the busts to Mesoamerican rain rituals, fertility cults, and ancestor veneration, while Tate (2012: 84–86) associated them with human gestation cycles.
- 21 For maps that usefully visualize the distribution and types of Mesoamerican sculpture from the Early Preclassic to the Middle Preclassic, see Clark (1994: figs. 16.4, 16.9), Clark and Pye (2000: fig. 1), and Clark et al. (2010: fig. 1.4).
- 22 Related to this discussion are ongoing debates about the relative influence of Gulf Coast Olmec culture (the “Mother Culture” hypothesis) versus other regions of Mesoamerica (the “Sister Culture” hypothesis). For the relationship between these debates and sculpture, see Bernal (1969), Caso (1942), Covarrubias (1942), Coe (1965b), and de la Fuente (1977). For much more recent discussions of this debate with regard to the broader material culture record, see the contrasting arguments in Blomster et al. (2005), Flannery et al. (2005), Neff et al. (2006), and Stoltman et al. (2005).
- 23 Compare the Buena Vista monument with, for example, Loma del Zapote Monument 12 (Cyphers 2004: figs. 173, 174).
- 24 Also see Borstein (2008). For an illustration of Laguna de los Cerros Monument 19, see Pasztory (2004: fig. 10).
- 25 Ojo de Agua was a “thriving inland town” in the Mazatán region that included, within its political orbit, coastal sites such as El Varal, which were focused on the

- seasonal production of salt and extraction of aquatic resources (Lesure 2009: 12, 247). Clark and Hodgson (2007–2008: 34) wrote that, “[w]ith its residential component, Ojo de Agua covered 200 ha or more and was a planned city; it is the earliest site currently known in Mesoamerica with formal pyramids.”
- 26 Also see an Olmec-style monument recently discovered at the site of Reynosa, in Escuintla, Guatemala. Although the sculpture, Reynosa Monument 11, lacks archaeological context, Chinchilla and Mejía (2018) suggested a date of c. 1000–700 BC based on stylistic and iconographic grounds. If this date is correct, the sculpture points, as they asserted, to the spread of Olmec conventions – at least in sculptural terms – well into southeastern Mesoamerica by the cusp of the Middle Preclassic period.
 - 27 Wide-brimmed hats whose upward projecting, conical portion is merged with the head of a zoomorphic creature, as on the Ojo de Agua Monument, are known from later periods. For one Classic Maya example, see Kerr 694 (in the Kerr archive of rollout photographs of Classic Maya vessels at <http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya.html>, accessed August 12, 1997). See Brittenham (2015: 151) for discussion of merchant hats with zoomorphic attributes at Cacaxtla and Calakmul.
 - 28 See Princeton (1995: figs. 84, 88, 90–93). An iconography involving cleft-headed effigy axes made an appearance on the Gulf Coast during the transition from the Early to the Middle Preclassic period, as attested archaeologically at the site of La Merced, Veracruz, where an anthropomorphic axe, dubbed “El Bebe,” was discovered. It bears a cleft head and facial features much like those of the object on Ojo de Agua Monument 3. La Merced Monument 1 also portrays a creature from whose cleft head emerges a sprout (Rodríguez and Ortiz 2000: figs. 13–15). Clark and Hodgson (2007–2008: 56–57) noted that a comparably early iconography of cleft heads and swept-back crania also appears on pottery made in the Tlapacoya style of the Basin of Mexico.
 - 29 See *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* no. 26 from 1960, p. 43, accession number 1959.55.12. I thank Stephanie Strauss for bringing this object to my attention.
 - 30 If, for example, we compare it with San Lorenzo Monument 56, we see that, on that monument, the striding individual’s encounter with the zoomorphic creature extends, ever so slightly, onto the sides of the monument.
 - 31 Ojo de Agua Monument 3 is not the only Pacific Coast sculpture whose manner of presenting the human form evinces sensibilities that make stylistic dating difficult and whose archaeological context lends limited clarification. Monument 3 from Tzutzuculi (near Tiltepec) was found, along with Monument 4, in a Middle Preclassic stone-lined cist (McDonald 1983: 39, fig. 32). Yet, as Clark and Hodgson (2007–2008: 69, fig. 13c) noted, its iconic presentation of a single human figure in elaborate regalia stylistically bears more in common with earlier sculpture. They compared it to the Padre Piedra monument, which was discovered along a pass through the Sierra Madre Mountains and dated by Green and Lowe (1967) to the end of the Early Preclassic period. Although the position of the standing figure does, indeed, resemble that of the individual on Tzutzuculi Monument 3, there is a second, diminutive individual present on the Padre Piedra monument. If, indeed, the Padre Piedra monument dates to the Early to Middle Preclassic transition, as scholars have suggested, it would suggest that experiments in multi-character compositions, comparable to those of the Gulf Coast, were transpiring along the Pacific Coast at least by the end of the Early Preclassic period. I would assert, however, that in formal and iconographic terms, the monument from Padre Piedra – like Ojo de Agua Monument 3 – fits more comfortably in the Middle Preclassic period, sharing, as it does, characteristics with the monuments at Middle Preclassic La Venta.
 - 32 See Proskouriakoff (1971) for the shift in Maya art from static to dynamic compositions and the significance of pose for conveying meaning, Clancy

- (1990, 1999: 19–21) for the significance of compositional devices in communicating concepts of time and movement, and Miller and Houston (1987) for the tendency of Maya scribes to, at times, conflate sequential events into a single composition. For additional discussion of narrativity in Mesoamerican compositions, see Martin (2006) and Chinchilla (2017).
- 33 Also see Grove (1973: 130), who early on recognized that Olmec art cannot be understood in isolation but is grounded in iconographic interconnections that link monuments in site centers to images painted beyond their immediate confines.
 - 34 Also see Stirling (1965: 721), who called attention to the dynamism of many Olmec monuments.
 - 35 For radiocarbon assays at La Venta, see González Lauck (1990: 159–166) and Cyphers (2014) for discussion.
 - 36 Also see Gillespie (2008c) and González Lauck (2010).
 - 37 According to González Lauck (2010: 138), Stela 5 is carved of serpentine, Monuments 25/26 and 86 of schist, and Monument 27 of gneiss, which means that all of the stelae from the centerline of the composition to the west were carved of green-hued stones. The more iconic stelae in this assemblage have been addressed by de la Fuente (1977: 92), González Lauck (2010: 135–138), Grove (2000: 291), Porter (1992), Schele (1995: 108), Tate (2012), and Taube (1996).
 - 38 Follensbee (2000) and Tate (2012: 240–241) suggested that two of the standing individuals might represent women.
 - 39 For analysis of the iconography of this monument, see Beverido (1970: 183), Milbrath (1979: 37), Reilly (1994), and Tate (2012: 247).
 - 40 See Milbrath (1979: 33), who commented on narrative scenes on altars and noted that their development may be significant in terms of chronological developments: “It could be that relief figures first appeared as a form of subsidiary decoration on altars, and subsequently developed as a separate art form, no longer used in combination with three-dimensional figural sculptures.” She noted that Clewlow (1974) had suggested similar chronological developments.
 - 41 But see Proskouriakoff (1971: 147–148) for a different, albeit less plausible, interpretation. Milbrath (1979: 30) noted that Proskouriakoff suggested that images such as these “may have had a pictographic function, reflecting a primitive form of picture-writing prior to the development of inscriptions.”
 - 42 Cyphers (1996: 68) described groupings at both San Lorenzo and Loma del Zapote. Cyphers and Di Castro (2009: 28–29) suggested that organization of the monumental heads at San Lorenzo resulted in a “macro-scene” that served as a historical display of rulers and, perhaps, their respective descent groups. At La Venta, González Lauck (2010) highlighted the following clusters of monuments: (1) the three colossal heads at the northern end of the site; (2) the colossal squatting figures at the southern end of the site on Structure D-7; (3) the celiform stelae, along with Stela 5, arrayed on the basal platform of Structure C-1; and (4) the paired altar/thrones found in association with both the basal platform of Complex C and Structure D-8. Tate’s (2012) suggestions for groupings – or “stations” as she called them – are much more complex and concerned with issues of gender and creation.
 - 43 Reilly and I (Guernsey and Reilly 2001: 41–47) noted a parallel between the imagery of Juxtlahuaca Painting 1 and that of La Venta Altar 4, where a rope also connects the niche figure to the individual carved in profile on the side of the monument (González Lauck 1994: fig. 6.25). Also see Grove (1973) and Niederberger (1996: 96).
 - 44 Drucker (1952) dated La Venta Monument 13 to the final phase of construction at the site.
 - 45 According to Strauss (2018a), establishing the relative dating of these very early inscribed monuments is made difficult by a number of factors including the lack

of firm dates or helpful archaeological context for several of them, including San José Mogote Monument 3 (Cahn and Winter 1993; Flannery and Marcus 1976) and the Cascajal block (Mora-Marín 2009; Rodríguez Martínez et al. 2006).

- 46 See Pool (2010: 102–104) for discussion of Milbrath's (1979) and Porter's (1989a) stylistic dating of Stela D; both placed it relatively late in the sequence of monuments at Tres Zapotes. Pool (2010: table 5.1, 122) placed its date near the beginning of the Late Preclassic period, but qualified that monuments at Tres Zapotes were carved throughout a rather extensive period of time that stretched from the early Middle Preclassic through the Late Preclassic. While Middle Preclassic compositions at Tres Zapotes emphasized individuals, presumably rulers, situated in "mythicoreligious" scenes, the ensuing Late Preclassic period would eschew an emphasis on personal authority, perhaps due to a sociopolitical shift at Tres Zapotes in which "individual authority was subsumed to a more communal governmental practice at the polity level" (Pool 2010: 122).
- 47 Jorge Angulo (1987: 142–144, fig. 10.13), Grove (1987: 119–120, fig. 9.9), and Tate (2012: 132) called attention to Chalcatzingo Monument 2, which features a series of masked figures carrying staffs (identified as weapons or agricultural implements depending on the author). The positioning of the figures and their striding postures imply a narrative sequence that culminates to the right, where a fourth individual lies on the ground. Although the figure to the left moves away from the scene, the two figures to his right advance toward the supine individual.
- 48 For the iconography of Monument 1, as well as the symbolic associations of quatrefoils as portals or openings into a supernatural realm, see Gillespie (1993), Grove (2000), Grove and Angulo (1987: 115), and Guernsey (2010b).

The intervisual connections at Chalcatzingo extended beyond the talus slope of Cerro Chalcatzingo to the terraces and elite residential precinct below. Monument 1 appears to provide a more narrative elaboration of the kind of rituals performed in conjunction with Monument 9, a three-dimensionally rendered quatrefoil aperture, which was positioned on top of the largest earthen platform in the central core of the site (Grove 2000: 285; also see Gillespie 1993; Grove 1999: 262; 2000: figs. 1, 10; Guernsey 2010b, 2012; and Love and Guernsey 2007). Chalcatzingo Monument 13 likewise features a quatrefoil with a figure bearing supernatural attributes inside (Angulo 1987: 141, fig. 10.12). Even on Monument 9, which lacks any anthropomorphic presence, the vestiges of a human protagonist are evident on closer inspection: Grove (2000) and Gillespie (1993) discussed how the wear on the lower lip of the monument appears to reflect the residual effect of performances in which an individual – again, presumably a ruler – moved through the quatrefoil portal, in effect recreating the scene portrayed on Monument 1.

- 49 It is important to note that these sensibilities were not unique to Chalcatzingo. Gutiérrez and Pye's (2016) documentation of an extraordinary cave in Techan, Guerrero, which contains several high-relief sculptures of schematic, anthropomorphic figures carved from the walls, testifies to a sustained interest in anchoring figural representations, carved in both low and high relief, to natural rock surfaces in this region of Mesoamerica during the Middle Preclassic period.
- 50 For examples of greenstone carvings that appear to elide gender signification, see Princeton (1995: nos. 20–22 and compare with 26); also see Follensbee (2009) for discussion. See Benson and de la Fuente (1996), Garber et al. (1993), Kovacevich (2013), and Pohorilenko (1996) for broader consideration of the significance of greenstone in Mesoamerica. Pohorilenko's (1996) study of figural greenstone objects noted their emphasis on anthropomorphic subjects; he also observed that many of their themes parallel those found on monuments, including standing humans with stylized features who sometimes hold infants, humans holding zoomorphs, seated humans, kneeling humans, reclining humans, fragmentary human heads, crouching figures, and so-called transformation figures that display feline characteristics. One sees, in the cache of small, carved standing

- stone figurines and celts from La Venta Offering 4, an interest in narrative clusters that parallels monumental sculpture (Magaloni and Filloy 2013).
- 51 Although monuments like Chalcatzingo Monument 21 offer a rare exception to the rule, the Preclassic corpus of human representations in stone, clay, and greenstone suggests – at least in my opinion – that an explicit emphasis on sex or gender was not necessarily a primary concern. Objects may have been charged with communicating other more salient social identities; for discussion of Preclassic social identities, see Blomster (2009) and Love (2007: 279–280). Fisher and Loren (2003: 228) argued that “[i]t is the performance of bodies in socially-constructed gendered activities, rather than the attributes of those bodies, that ensures gender identity.”
 - 52 Middle Preclassic Olmec-style sculpture at Takalik Abaj includes petroglyphs, sculpture in the round, boulder sculptures, and niche sculpture (Graham 1981a, 1982; Graham and Benson 2005; Graham, Heizer, and Shook 1978: 12–14; Orrego 1990, 1998, 2001; Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego 2001, 2002: 59; 2010). While many of the free-standing sculptures that date from this period may have been associated originally with Middle Preclassic structures, most were relocated in ancient times and lack a primary context (Graham 1979: 184; 1981a, b, 1982). Examples of Olmec-style art at Takalik Abaj include Monument 14, a boulder sculpture which features a frontally facing, squatting figure clutching an animal, one feline and the other hooved, in the crook of each arm (Graham 1981b: fig. 3). Monument 14’s impressive volume contrasts with that of Monument 16/17, an unusual pillar-like rendition of an Olmec head that was broken in the ancient past (Graham 1979: 231; Orrego 1990: fig. 15). Monument 19 (Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego 2010: fig. 8.3d) portrays a striding individual indebted to pictorial innovations that Tate (2012: 131) argued developed c. 850 BC.
 - 53 Surrounding the figure’s body are S-scrolls, which were part of a widespread iconography of rain and agricultural fertility during the Preclassic period and later (Reilly 1996; Stone 1996: 403; Stuart and Houston 1994).
 - 54 Also see La Blanca Monument 2 (Love 2010: fig. 7.2b), which is a limb fragment from a standing human figure.
 - 55 In spite of the fact that Clark (Clark and Pye 2000; Clark and Pérez Suárez 1994) had argued, originally, for a Middle Preclassic assignment for Pijijiapan Monument 1, he revisited this assessment in a later publication (Clark and Hodgson 2007–2008: 72–73), asserting that a lack of Middle Preclassic pottery at Pijijiapan supports a Jocotal phase date, c. 1200–1000 BC.
 - 56 Compare the new drawing of Monument 1, commissioned by the New World Archaeological Foundation (Clark and Pye 2000: fig. 3b), with Navarrete’s (1974: fig. 3; Clark and Pye 2000: fig. 3a) earlier drawing of the monument. Having not seen this monument in person, I am unwilling to weigh in on which drawing is more accurate. Clark and Pérez Suárez (1994) interpreted the imagery as a marriage scene, an argument that I do not find convincing.
 - 57 Pye and Gutiérrez (2007: 236) noted that the posture of one of the figures on Chalchuapa Monument 12 (“Figure B” in Anderson’s 1978 nomenclature) parallels that of another Middle Preclassic figure painted onto the wall of Cuauzidziqui Cave in Guerrero.
 - 58 So, too, does Miscellaneous Monument 2 from Izapa, Chiapas. Monument 2 (Norman 1973: plate 64) shares formal features with niche monuments from La Venta, Tres Zapotes, Takalik Abaj, and Tiltepec (Nuckols 2019). Parsons (1986: 18–20) placed these Middle Preclassic niche monuments in his “Olmecoid,” or Olmec-derived, style category that encompassed sculpture dating from the Middle Preclassic through the early years of the Late Preclassic. Bove (1989: 84, fig. 87) discussed one such example, Los Cerritos Sur Monument 2, which portrays a squatting figure within a niche. As he observed, it bears a close resemblance to Takalik Abaj Monument 25, another niche sculpture

- bearing a central, squatting human figure. Occupations at Los Cerritos Sur, Takalik Abaj, and Izapa from the Middle Preclassic onward support the possibility that these monuments date to the Middle Preclassic period. However, whether they represent Middle Preclassic Olmec influence or a somewhat later, Middle to Late Preclassic transition Olmec-derived style, is not clear. Recent archaeological investigations at Izapa directed by Rosenswig et al. (2018) have provided more concrete information concerning the depositional context of Miscellaneous Monument 2. Their associated radiocarbon assays, as well as Frontera-phase pottery associated with the monument (Lowe et al. 1982: 196–199; Navarrete 2013), suggest a date in the latter part of the Middle Preclassic period.
- 59 Plain or uncarved monuments were as central to acts of placemaking and symbolic expression as their carved counterparts (Bove 2011). Other Middle Preclassic sites in the Guatemalan Highlands with plain stelae include Piedra Parada, Virginia, and Urías (Bove 2011; Braswell and Robinson 2011; Shook 1952).
 - 60 In my discussion of Kaminaljuyu monuments, I am using the inventory numbers assigned to the monuments by the Proyecto Arqueológico Kaminaljuyu (PAK). For a correlation between Parson's (1986) inventory numbers and those of PAK, see Henderson (2013: appendix 2). Shook dated the Kaminaljuyu Mound C-III-6 cache containing Sculpture 9 to the Majadas phase in the Middle Preclassic period. However, many scholars now doubt the existence of the Majadas phase as a distinct time period; a more parsimonious phase assignment would be Providencia, although scholars continue to debate the placement and span of that phase (Inomata et al. 2014; Love 2018; Shook and Popenoe de Hatch 1999). A rough temporal placement for the Mound C-III-6 objects that most scholars could agree on would be approximately 500–300 BC, which is the date I use here.
 - 61 It does compare, conceptually at least, to the “breath bead” in front of the face of the figure on La Venta Stela 19 as well as those on contemporaneous figurines (Guernsey 2012: 131–134). Also see Houston and Taube (2000) and Chapter 4 for further discussion.
 - 62 Houston (1998: 521) argued that these artistic sensibilities indicate that the Maya viewed certain buildings as animate entities.
 - 63 Clark and Pye (2011: 36) noted that low reliefs like the Xoc carving “appear to mark major trade routes.” See Clark and Pye (2000), Lee (1989), Navarrete (1978), Niederberger (2002), and Pye and Gutiérrez (2007) for discussion.
 - 64 The bundle carried by the figure at Xoc, marked by bands and knots, links it to other monuments featuring bundles, likely made of cloth, which enveloped the bodies of sacred objects, monuments, and rulers throughout the Preclassic and in later periods (Guernsey 2006a; Reilly 2006; Stuart 1996).
 - 65 After its documentation in 1968 by Susanna Ekholm-Miller (1973: 2, figs. 8–15), however, the monument was looted, apparently “chiseled off the rock face, probably piece by piece.” Fortunately, the monument was recently repatriated to Mexico, where it now resides in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City (<http://arqueologiamexicana.mx/mexico-antiguo/el-bajorreliede-xoc-en-el-museo-nacional-de-antropologia>). Accessed April 20, 2018.
 - 66 For further discussion, see Clark (1994: 263; 1997) and Grove (1973, 1981: 377–378).
 - 67 Pasztory (2005: 104) does briefly mention “much evidence for earlier clay modeling” and suggests that it played a role in solving the technical problems of representation, particularly naturalism, for Olmec monuments like the colossal heads. Although she mentions no specifics, she suggests that clay models of faces may have been used to transform imagery to stone.
 - 68 For a summary of the literature and issues concerning portraiture in Olmec art, see Gillespie (1999) and Pasztory (2005: 180–187).

3 EARLY AND MIDDLE PRECLASSIC FIGURATION IN CLAY

- 1 As several authors have addressed, the term “representation” poses challenges when applied to figurines. Lesure (1999), for example, urged scholars to think about figurines as both representations and products with an economic reality, while Meskell (2007: 143) cautioned that some figurines may not necessarily be “referents for something else tangible, but could be experienced as real and tangible things in themselves.”
- 2 Bánffy (2017: 705) noted that, in Old World scholarship, figurines often “shared the common fate of the category of objects regarded as ‘interesting small finds.’”
- 3 See, for example, *The New World Figurine Project* volumes (Stocker 1991b; Stocker and Charlton 2001), the 2009 volume *Mesoamerican Figurines: Small-Scale Indices of Large-Scale Social Phenomena* edited by Halperin, Faust, Taube, and Giguet or, on an international scale, *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Figurines* (2017) edited by Insoll. An increasing number of regionally based studies focused on figurines have also appeared, such as Halperin’s (2014) or Pulido Méndez’s (2008) monographs, to cite only two examples, as have any number of theses and dissertations, typically focused on figurine assemblages from specific archaeological projects. For example, three master’s theses have been written about the figurines at the site of La Blanca since 2011: Long (2011), Pinzón (2011), and Ronsairo (2016).
- 4 Renfrew (2007a: 121) cautioned that we should not necessarily assume that the scale of figurines was a “pre-formulated intentionality,” as it could just as well be due to their process of manufacture (with hollow techniques affording, in general, larger objects). In Mesoamerica, at least at a site like La Blanca, there is no clear and consistent correlation between scale and technique of manufacture. The solid versus hollow distinction is an important one, nevertheless, and there are clear instances in the archaeological record of large, hollow figures whose distribution is much more restricted than that of their smaller, mostly solid counterparts. See, for example, Blomster’s (2002) excellent analysis of so-called hollow baby figures. A tradition of crafting fairly large (20- to 30-cm-tall) hollow figurines emerged very early in the history of Mesoamerica. At Locona phase Paso de la Amada, in the Mazatán region of the south coast, hollow figurines required an investment in skill and labor that far exceeded that of solid figurines, which were quite crude during the early years of the Early Preclassic period (Lesure 1999: 215). Clark (1994: 420–421) argued that they were the work of attached craft specialists and likely distributed according to the whims of political leaders. Throughout the course of the Early Preclassic period, however, the production of solid figurines became more sophisticated. Lesure (1999: 210) attributed this to a shift in the organization of figurine production “in which individuals were increasingly likely to obtain figurines from others rather than fabricating their own.” Increased attention to solid figurines, Lesure (1999: 217) argued, may have been linked to demand, which was driven by a new interest in the human body and its representation.
- 5 There is evidence from the Classic period that a variety of objects, not necessarily representational, were crafted out of diverse materials, some of which are preserved to varying degrees in the archaeological record. Michel Quenon (personal communication, 2018) called my attention to small, lightweight stelae made from powdered conch shell mortar at the site of Jonuta, Tabasco, discovered by Miriam Judith Gallegos Gómora, to offer one example. See www.inah.gob.mx/es/boletines/1869-hallazgo-maya-en-jonuta (accessed October 28, 2017).
- 6 Most figurines at San Lorenzo depict humans (73 percent according to Cheetham and Blomster 2017: 29), but animal effigies do exist. The poses of humans are quite animated: in one fragmentary example (Coe and Diehl 1980: fig. 362), the figure has one leg outstretched and the other drawn up close to the chest. In others (Coe and Diehl 1980: figs. 357, 363, 365), intact arms display a variety of

positions and gestures. Details of surface treatment also vary and include traces of paint, pigment, bitumen, and slip.

- 7 I note these debates in order to underscore the problems in definitively assigning a gender to many of these objects, a topic not unique to San Lorenzo, as will become clear. There is a substantial body of literature dedicated to exploring questions of gender in figurine traditions around the globe. I do not address it here but repeat a passage from Kuijt (2017: 547), who reminds us of the complexity of the task. He noted: “people’s understandings of their biological, material bodies are just as socially constructed as their developed gender identities.”
- 8 The uncalibrated phase dates used by Coe and Diehl (1980) are as follows: San Lorenzo A (1150–1050 BC), San Lorenzo B (1050–900 BC), Nacaste (900–700 BC), and Palangana (600–400 BC).
- 9 Rodríguez and Ortiz (1997: 92) noted only one figurine fragment from El Manatí, which they described as “a head that exhibits reworking consisting of lateral cuts around the ears, possibly for suspension or to represent ear plugs. Nearby we found jade beads, and it is possible that the head functioned as a pectoral.” It was associated with the Manatí A subphase, which Rodríguez and Ortiz (1997: 74) aligned with the Early Preclassic Barra and Locona phases in Chiapas.
- 10 Trapiche figurines were first defined by García Payón (1966) at the site of El Trapiche, Veracruz.
- 11 Joyce (1999: 26) noted that while pottery was the most consistent artifact in burials at Tlatilco, figurines were nevertheless widely present. Multiple burials included from two to five figurines, but burials with exceptional numbers of figurines were rarer. At Tlatilco, although the figurines did not reveal greater density in high-status burials than in low-status ones (Gillespie 1987: 265), Lesure (2011: 128–129; 2012: 388) contended that high-status graves display an overall greater emphasis on figurines than their low-status counterparts when figurines are weighed against total offerings.
- 12 Wesley Stoner (personal communication, 2017), for example, noted that there are more Olmec-style objects in female graves at Tlatilco than in male graves, which led him to suggest that Olmec-style figurines may have been used to express aspects of identity (versus, for example, status).
- 13 Lesure (2015: 100) analyzed extant collections of figurines, assembled in the twentieth century, from Zacatenco and Ticoman; the sample included 321 specimens from Zacatenco and 260 from Ticomán. The figurines from Tlaxcala came from recent excavations and include “1681 fragments, of which 928 were anthropomorphic head and body fragments.”
- 14 Lesure’s essay continued with a discussion of the meanings and significance of fashion and style for Preclassic figurines. Several of his conclusions are important to note, including the fact that stylistic distinctions “may have referenced relations of power and authority,” or “might have expressed alternative discourses” that “provided opportunities to renegotiate or even contest” those portrayals (Lesure 2015: 105). Regardless of which purpose they served, Lesure concluded that stylistic distinctions “deepen the visual impact of differences in subject matter.” With these figurines, the most potent fashion statements were anchored to the human body: Lesure (2015: 116) noted, for example, that animal figurines displayed considerably less stylistic elaboration.
- 15 Marcus (1998: 44) utilized 117 figurine heads from Drennan’s (1976) San José Mogote excavations as well as those collected by their investigations beginning in 1974.
- 16 Marcus (1998: 5, 311) suggested that Early and Middle Preclassic women used figurines in rituals of ancestor veneration, through which figurines became animated by the spirits of returning forebears. She argued that other figurines buried under household foundation stones represent ancestors who dedicated or protected the domestic space.

- 17 Blomster (2009) and Hepp and Joyce (2013: 269–270) more fully discuss gender categories in figurines from Oaxaca.
- 18 Blomster (2014: 85) dated only twelve Etlatongo figurine heads to the Cruz A phase, out of a sample of 141.
- 19 Cruz B female figurines display narrow waists, exaggerated thighs, and vestiges of red paint in the leg, breast, and shoulder regions (Blomster 2009: 130). Their body positions are quite consistent, usually reflecting a rather static, standing posture. Blomster (2009: 144) linked this homogeneity to “a more rigid structuring of identities in a society witnessing the emergence of higher-status actors and new power relations.”
- 20 He also pointed to another intriguing example of an interest in new identities: a mask in the Olmec style from a higher-status context that is “a striking example of transformation and disguise involving exotic imagery – an example of changing face and identity” (Blomster 2009: 144).
- 21 Rust’s survey of La Venta and its environs also established more refined chronological data for figurines. According to Rust (2008: 1226, 1404, 1438), 88 percent of figurines at La Venta come from late stratigraphic levels; there was a near absence of them during San Lorenzo’s florescence, in spite of some occupation at La Venta during that period.
- 22 Ten figurines from San Andrés, or 3 percent of the total collection, portray animals (Tway 2004: 92).
- 23 They observed that this same lack of ear decoration characterizes jade figures from the site, most of which reveal “pierced ears instead of appended items.” According to Tway (2004: 50), only eight of the figurines at San Andrés wear earpools.
- 24 The contexts defined as burials by Clark and Colman are classified by other scholars, such as Drucker et al. (1959: 162) and Gillespie (2008c: 13), as offerings because of a lack of human bone. Clark and Colman argued that the ornaments would have originally accompanied a human body, whose bones were not preserved.
- 25 Yet, as Arnold (2012: 192) reminded scholars, a very complicated Gulf Olmec presence – one that is “contingent and situational” – emerges when figurines and sculpture are considered in tandem: “While the distribution of sculpture encapsulates broad areas of the Gulf lowlands, patterning in figurines and imported obsidian heralds multiple spheres of Gulf Olmec interaction.” Cultural expression in the Gulf Coast Olmec region was never, in his words, “internally homogeneous” (Arnold 2012: 195). It defies any typological models, especially when more than one category of material culture is considered.
- 26 Similar patterns of breakage are documented at Yautepec, Morelos, where figurines bear a strong relationship to those from Chalcatzingo (Smith and Montiel 2008: 256–257).
- 27 Cyphers (1993: 217) noted that only in these areas of specialized workshops were figurines found in burials, in both cases associated with an infant.
- 28 This interpretation contrasts with earlier ones focused on purported fertility cults; see, for example, Piña Chan (1955). Cyphers (1993: 213) argued that the most salient theme of the figurines was pregnancy, which was portrayed at three particular stages.
- 29 In a later publication, Grove and Gillespie (2002: 15) qualified that an interpretation of the C8 figurines as ancestors is more likely, based on what they interpreted as personalized portraits of at least twenty different individuals. Cyphers (1993: 214) noted that the presence of C8 types at La Venta and Tres Zapotes reveals Chalcatzingo’s increasing contact with the Gulf Coast and participation in growing spheres of trade and communication at this point in time.
- 30 However, as he clarified, this evidence also points to the blurred boundaries between domestic structures and civic/ceremonial spaces, some of which were

- probably controlled by an emerging elite at this time. See Brown (2008), Guernsey (2012: 111–115), Hepp and Joyce (2013: 268), and R. Joyce (2000a: 28; 2004).
- 31 Rice addressed eighteen figurine fragments from Ixlú and 121 from Nixtun-Ch'ich'. She also drew from Laporte and Fialko's (1993) excavations at Tikal that recovered "at least one hollow and 38 solid figurines and fragments" in the Mundo Perdido; more were recovered from the North Acropolis. Rice (2015: 8) noted that, further to the north in the northern lowlands, figurines are "largely absent."
 - 32 The earliest figurines in the Playa de los Muertos tradition date to the Early Preclassic period and are found discarded around households (R. Joyce and Henderson 2001). By the Middle Preclassic, figurines were utilized in conjunction with burials (R. Joyce 2003: 248–250). At nearby Las Honduritas, figurines were scattered along with ceramic wares, perhaps the remains of a ceremonial feast; a similar context was reported at San Juan Camalote. Joyce (2003: 249) noted that the "actual sample of scientifically-excavated and adequately-described Formative figurines from these sites is extremely small: only 131 examples that I have been able to confirm."
 - 33 Even the earlier more schematic figurines, however, are "iconic of a human body, and indexical of the activity of their makes and users" (R. Joyce 2007: 102).
 - 34 According to Joyce (2007: 107), "[t]he Honduran makers and users of these figurines also participated in analogous practices of modifying living bodies, indicated by the recovery of ornaments in burials at the same bodily sites, and inferred from the material culture of embodiment recovered in refuse."
 - 35 This evidence is not unique to Honduras. Hepp (2015: fig. 7.19) noted that an early human figurine from La Consentida, found associated with a hearth and radiocarbon-dated to between 1880 and 1641 BC, appears to have been suspended for wear.
 - 36 Linares qualified that if one includes animals, zoomorphs, and whistles, a grand total of 1,463 figurine fragments were recovered. In her thesis, however, she dealt only with anthropomorphic representations.
 - 37 Linares (2009: 21) compared this interest in the female form at Naranjo with other sites in the Valley of Guatemala, like Kaminaljuyu, where there appears to have been a similar emphasis on female representations (Kidder 1965; Wetherington 1978).
 - 38 The precise dating of Kaminaljuyu figurines in the literature is difficult to assess, given the lack of consistent phase names and associated dates. Of the 284 figurine fragments encountered during excavations directed by Ohi (1994: 326), forty-one with secure archaeological contexts were dated to the "Kaminaljuyu II" period. Galeotti (2001), working with figurines recovered by the Proyecto Kaminaljuyu-Miraflores II, assigned most of the fragmentary figurines to the Middle Preclassic period. Likewise, at the site of Piedra Parada southeast of Guatemala City, Valdés and Marroquín (2000) attributed the majority (forty-three) of the sixty-four fragmentary figurines found in refuse deposits or domestic features to the Las Charcas phase. They assigned twenty-one to the following Providencia phase. They also noted that of the sixty-four specimens, 60 percent were anthropomorphic, 27 percent zoomorphic, and 13 percent unknown/amorphous.
 - 39 But see Clark et al. (2017: 75, fig. A14a) for an Early Preclassic Cotorra phase figurine from Chiapa de Corzo crafted in the style of San Lorenzo figurines. Also see Agrinier (2000) and Miller (2014) for figurines from the Chiapas sites of Mirador and La Libertad.
 - 40 However, some figurines stylistically dated to earlier periods were found in mixed contexts. Lynne Lowe (in Bachand et al. 2008: 15) concluded that a figurine stylistically related to the Dili-phase but found in mixed Francesca–Guanacaste phase deposits associated with Structure 1 was evidence of the use of transported

fill from early occupation zones at the site. Such mixed contexts at Chiapa de Corzo make determination of the duration of the figurine tradition there difficult to establish. Clark et al. (2017: 90) did assert, however, that some animal figurines at Chiapa de Corzo were made from a ceramic paste like that used during the latter part of the Late Preclassic period.

- 41 Lesure's (1999: 211) sample from Paso de la Amada consisted of "463 solid head and torso fragments and 193 hollow fragments." Also see Clark (1994).
- 42 Lesure (1997: 234–235) qualified that "arms became more common late in the sequence, amid other changes beginning to occur in the figurine representational system."
- 43 Lesure (1997: 240) qualified, however, that similar masks and costumes show up throughout the Mazatán region. This repetition at a variety of sites could indicate a common iconographic system focused on shared ritual roles rather than the signification of a specific office.
- 44 See Clark and Pye (2000: fig. 25 top), Lesure (1999: 241), and Guernsey (2012: 121–122) for discussion, as well as Marcus (1998: 48, fig. 8.16) for a miniature four-legged stool or throne that could have accommodated a ceramic figurine from San José Mogote. Brzezinski et al. (2017) addressed miniature stone thrones dating to the latter portion of the Late Preclassic period from the coast of Oaxaca.
- 45 This intervisual domain also included numerous duck pendants, whistles, and ocarinas found archaeologically at sites across Mesoamerica during the Preclassic and in later periods, as well as the duck pendants that appear in the form of costume components on carved stone monuments. See Coe (1965b: fig. 25), Taube (2000: fig. 80, 2004: plate 36), Princeton (1995: fig. 181), Weiant (1943: plate 48), and Tway (2004: 92, fig. 5.10a). Pohorilenko (1996: fig. 12) published a small, composite representation of a duck and an ear of corn perforated for suspension. In 2017, a fragmentary ceramic duck-bill was discovered at La Blanca; it must have been part of a much larger ceramic duck effigy. Taube (2004: 172–173) linked Preclassic duck-billed figures like one on the west wall of the Las Pinturas Structure at San Bartolo (Taube et al. 2010: 49) to later duck-billed characters like the Aztec god of wind Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl.
- 46 Rosenswig (2011: 255) argued that the figurines with standardized masks found in Mazatán and also 40 km away at Cuauhtémoc indicate a shared culture that was distinct from less sedentary groups to the southeast and northwest. He further noted that at San José Mogote, in Oaxaca, similar masked figurines were not documented, although female figurines much like those in the Soconusco were present. By contrast, at Tlatilco, in Central Mexico, similar masked figurines were present while that site lacked the female ones found in the Soconusco.
- 47 See, for instance, glyph numbers 39 and 142 in Méluzin's (1995: fig. 107) catalog of Isthmian glyphs, the "Venus" glyph – T510a and T510b – in Thompson's (1962) system, or ZQD in Macri and Looper's (2003: 229–230) system.
- 48 See Marchagay (2014) for discussion of potential body painting, scarification, and/or tattooing practices during the Late Preclassic in the Huastec region.
- 49 Blomster (2017: 292) noted, however, that "iconography inscribed on figurines" vanished in Oaxaca during the Middle Preclassic period.
- 50 The star shape also appears on a Cuadros phase roller stamp from Cantón Corralito (Cheetham 2007: fig. 76) as well as on stamps from Kaminaljuyu (Ericastilla 2001: fig. 1–4, nos. 33–35 and photo 1–2, no. 33) dated to the Verbena–Arenal phases.
- 51 Garton and Taube (2017) presented a number of additional examples of this star motif, as did Chinchilla and Mejía (2018), who noted its presence on a recently discovered monument from Reynosa, Guatemala, that portrays a supernatural creature. They likewise emphasized the motif's close association, beginning in the Preclassic period, with skin and faces.

- 52 Stephanie Strauss called this object to my attention. For color photographs, see www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/313327 (accessed April 9, 2017).
- 53 Scholars working with Old World figurines have grappled with these same difficulties in ascertaining function, as a quote from Meskell (2007: 141–142) reveals: “If we think of a range of uses or rationales for making figurines we arrive at the usual suite of suggestions: amulets, talismans, narrative devices, images of individuals or ancestors, tokens, training devices, deities, gaming pieces, objects of magic or manipulation, initiation, contracts in clay, and so on.”
- 54 See Halperin, Faust, et al. (2009), R. Joyce (1998, 2000b, 2003), Lesure (1997, 1999, 2005, 2011, 2012, 2015), and Meskell and Joyce (2003).
- 55 Also see Joyce (1993, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2009) and Lesure (1997, 1999, 2005, 2011, 2017). In spite of these methodological trends and the avenues of investigation that they have opened, there is still great debate about the applicability of contemporary social theories to archaeology. See Lesure (2005) for a critical evaluation of the use of embodiment theory to discuss prehistoric figurines, as well as Houston and McAnany (2003). Concerns were also raised by Fisher and Loren (2003: 227) and Gillespie (2008b).

4 FIGURINES AT MIDDLE PRECLASSIC LA BLANCA

- 1 When La Blanca emerged as a regional center by c. 1000 BC, adjacent Mazatán zone polities collapsed and the region was abandoned (Blake and Clark 1999: 64; Love 2002a). The Río Jesús zone to the southeast was also depopulated, as were inland zones near modern Retalhuleu (Pye 1995; Pye and Demarest 1991). It appears that the leaders of La Blanca attracted surrounding populations to the newly emerging polity (Love 1999b: 90).
- 2 According to Arroyo (2002: 234), figurine usage at La Blanca peaked toward the end of the Conchas phase.
- 3 It is important to note, however, that the technology to accommodate movement of figurine parts existed at this point in time, even though it is not represented at La Blanca. The body of a large figurine found at Takalik Abaj in Burial No. 2 possessed a tenon for a neck, over which a separate movable head was placed (Schieber de Lavarreda 2016: fig. 8). For later Classic Maya examples, see Sears (2017: fig. 11.2, bottom).
- 4 Arroyo (2002: 205) stated that the human figurines from the 1985 excavations included 163 heads, 138 torsos, 283 arms, 487 legs, 58 unclassifiable torso fragments, and 32 additional animal or unclassifiable heads. Ronsairo (2016: fig. 4.2) noted that of the 333 heads and 92 body fragments that she analyzed, only 7 percent were zoomorphic.
- 5 Working with the 138 torso fragments from the 1985 excavations, Arroyo (2002: 222) identified 64 as female and 42 as male; she was unable to ascertain gender for the remaining 58. Pinzón (2011: 91, fig. 8.8), based on her sample of 181 body fragments from 2004–2008 excavations, determined that 60 percent were female, 23 percent male, and 17 percent of indeterminate gender. She added that, in a few cases, even when only heads exist, determination of gender can be based, as when a full beard is present. Pinzón also identified some heads as female (24 percent of her sample of 263 heads) based on costume elements; however, she was unable to assign gender to 60 percent of the heads examined.
- 6 These figurines contrast with others, like Early Preclassic tripod figurines that possess a third “appendage,” in addition to two legs, as if to stabilize them (see Arnold and Follensbee 2015: fig. 3), or some that possess markedly arched feet that facilitate a standing posture (Pool 2017: 253).
- 7 The goal of this study is not to present the entire corpus of figurines at La Blanca nor to engage with the classificatory schemes that have been used to analyze them, which have changed through time. Arroyo’s (2002) types were provisional descriptive categories; as she stipulated, “[m]uch more work is planned at this site

in the future and so it would be premature to finalize type names based on the current sample.” Different, but equally provisional, types were utilized in subsequent studies by Ivic de Monterroso (2004) and Pinzón (2011). Throughout my discussion I reference the “type” designation utilized by the authors who have worked with the figurines at La Blanca in order to facilitate cross-referencing between the various published studies or theses, written in the United States and Guatemala. Refining and establishing an internally consistent classification system for La Blanca figurines is a task for the future.

- 8 For seated figures at La Blanca, see Pinzón (2011: 66–67), whose sample included sixty-seven compared with only seventeen standing.
- 9 Arroyo (2002: 215) noted that each tab figurine possesses unique attributes such as decorative fillets, additional costume elements that may represent animal skins, or different surface treatments that include red paint and, occasionally, white slip.
- 10 Markedly open mouths also characterize contemporary figurines from the Gulf Coast, as in the case of Trapiche-style figurines from Tres Zapotes and La Joya. See Figure 3.4a as well as Arnold and Follensbee (2015: fig. 8) and Pool (2017: fig. 12.8).
- 11 Pinzón (2011: 133) noted that 21 percent of heads and 4 percent of bodies at La Blanca display white pigment. See Zedeño (2017: 412) for the use of red paint among native groups in North America as an “animating substance.”
- 12 According to Laporte and Fialko (1995: 46 n. 7), “Como ejemplos de pintura corporal aparecen algunas líneas paralelas de color rojo en la espalda, tórax, brazos y piernas. Una figurilla completa presenta pintura facial cercana a la boca y en el cabello.”
- 13 Drucker (1952: plate 30q) illustrated a figurine from La Venta that adopts a strikingly similar pose, with hands drawn to the mouth, and Coe (1965b: fig. 10) described a serpentine figurine from Xico, Veracruz, that makes a similar gesture. For discussion, see Guernsey and Love (2008).
- 14 This O-shaped mouth is also found on other figurine types, not all of which are human. For examples, see Pinzón (2011: fig. 5.18).
- 15 This transference of iconography from Early and Middle Preclassic figurines to Late Preclassic monumental sculpture is made particularly clear by the corpus of potbelly monuments, and the disembodied Monte Alto heads, in which the portrayal of exhalations or vocalizations was key to their significance as ancestral representations (Guernsey 2012: 131–134). There is also considerable ethnohistoric and ethnographic evidence documenting a relationship between breath, vitality, and the emanation of sound. Although I will not repeat those arguments here, I will call attention to the fact that these continuities hint at the fluid relationships that existed between categories of objects. They also indicate that the vibrant traditions of representation explored in the form of Early and Middle Preclassic figurines provided fertile ground for later, monumental sculptural innovations. The evidence constituted by the potbelly sculptures and monumental heads at Monte Alto alone demonstrates that Late Preclassic artists borrowed features, and possibly meanings, which had an enormously long duration in Mesoamerica and that – through time – permeated boundaries of scale, medium, and context.
- 16 Such representational beads in Preclassic art are matched by Preclassic burial evidence in which jade beads were placed in the mouths of deceased individuals; for a summary of this evidence, see Guernsey (2012: 132–133). Pinzón (2011: fig. 9.12) illustrated a figurine from La Blanca that has two breath beads, one emanating from each nostril. She compared this to the ruler portrayed on the Leiden Plaque, whose nose also emits two breath beads (see Houston and Taube 2000: fig. 3).
- 17 In the wild, coatimundis can be heard emitting huffing, woofing, or clicking sounds, especially when surprised or disturbed in some way, and I would suggest that figurines portraying coatimundis with hands raised to their mouths reference

- this act of sound-making. Redfield (1936) linked coatimundis to agricultural ceremonies in Belize and Quintana Roo as well as festival buffoonery and clowning. The sounds emitted by these Preclassic whistles may have been likened to those of animals from the natural world, but it is also quite likely that they called attention to the fact that similar gestures, sounds, and behaviors were shared by both animals and humans.
- 18 For other examples, see Henderson (2013: 122, fig. 13d), Kidder et al. (1946: fig. 42), Ohi and Torres (1994: figs. IV-2 and IV-3), Parsons (1986: 52), Princeton (1995: fig. 40), and Schieber de Lavarreda and Orrego Corzo (2001: 1).
 - 19 Arroyo (2002: 212) observed that the majority of figurines at La Blanca wear “napkin ring earspools” like those reported by Coe (1961: fig. 60) at La Victoria. Of the 650 earspools recorded at La Blanca, only 27 (4 percent) are decorated with incised or painted designs; decorated earspools were, in Love’s opinion, a trend of relatively short duration (Love 1991: 61, fig. 8).
 - 20 For animal figurines and their social significance in other parts of the world, see Kuijt and Chesson (2007), Meskell (2015), and Nanoglou (2008a, b).
 - 21 A modern Tzeltal myth recounted by Chinchilla (2017: 182) speaks to notions of embodied selves, beyond the human, that exist today in some Maya communities. The story recounts how, after a boy (who would eventually become the sun) toppled a tree onto one of his older brothers, animals emerged from pieces of the brother’s shattered body. It explains the origins of animals and valorizes the clearing of trees in order to produce agricultural fields, but at its heart, too, is an understanding of a fundamental continuum of identity between the human and the animal.
 - 22 See Lesure (2000) for a detailed discussion of these late Early Formative effigy vessels, their zoomorphic imagery, and their relationship to more abstract Olmec iconographic systems that eventually replaced them by 1000 BC in the Mazatán region.
 - 23 On these vessels, the felines’ open mouths dominate the composition and lower jaws are missing. For illustrations, see Love and Guernsey (2008: fig. 7e; 2011: fig. 8.5a).
 - 24 This vessel comes from excavations in a non-elite household (SM 90-34-2-R97-7).
 - 25 This vessel comes from excavations in an elite household (SM 90-32-2-8-22).
 - 26 This vessel comes from excavations in an elite household (SM 90-37-2-11-184). Vessels such as this, which feature four faces around the circumference of the vessel, anticipate later stone monuments like Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 210 (Guernsey 2012: fig. 4.29b, c), which also features a format in which four faces mark each side of its quadrangular form.
 - 27 This vessel comes from excavations in an elite household (SM-90-32-1-13-495) and probably, when complete, had a diameter of approximately 12 cm.
 - 28 To be clear, this does not appear to have been a Middle Preclassic innovation. Lesure (2009: 165, fig. 11.10a) illustrated a miniature effigy vessel from Jocotal phase El Varal. Although miniature vessels would continue to be produced during the Late Preclassic period in this region, as at the site of El Ujuxte, they are plain and lack the figural elements that enliven those at La Blanca (Guernsey and Love 2005: fig. 5).
 - 29 For a monumental example of somewhat rectilinear eyes, see Estero Rabón Monument 5 (Cyphers 2004: figs. 179, 180).
 - 30 Lesure suggested that variations of stylistic redundancies might constitute “alternative conceptions of humanness” or an interest in the contestation of the status quo (Lesure 2012: 381–383; 2015: 105–108). However, in his opinion, the variations reveal more about stylistic choices and experimentation than an interest in contesting the subject matter of these objects. Also see Winter (1994: 134) and Blomster (2014: 84) for similar figurines in spatially disparate contexts in the

highlands and Valley of Oaxaca, which they related to potential part-time craft or regional specialization.

- 31 Thirty-two of them come from domestic mounds and the remaining sixteen from the fill of Mound 1.
- 32 This figurine type appears to have had significant temporal duration: a related form was found in an early Jocotal-phase context at El Mesak, Guatemala (Mary Pye, personal communication, 2008), and a small stone figurine head bearing strikingly similar features was found in a context dated to the Early Preclassic period at Ojo de Agua, Chiapas (John Clark, personal communication, 2008; Clark et al. 1990). A number of closed-eye figurines, albeit without the same suite of facial features, were documented by Mountjoy (1991: fig. 5) at La Pintada, Jalisco.
- 33 Although I am concentrating on figurine faces and heads in this discussion, recurring bodies, postures, and costuming also likely served as visual clues of shared identities. See Lesure (2012: 373) for discussion of the stylistic choices implied in figurine production, which he linked to processes of aesthetic valuation.
- 34 Furst (1995: 81) and Monaghan (1998: 139) both noted that Aztec elites either chose not to use their day names or suppressed the corresponding calendrical number due to a belief that public disclosure of the complete day name revealed a dangerous amount of information about their identities, souls, and destinies. Such caution suggests that a concern for identity theft is not a purely modern phenomenon!
- 35 It is, at first glance, less clear how animal figurines would fit into this conceptual scheme. One potential explanation, which resonates with Monaghan's (1998: 141–144) ideas, is that some of these animal or unusual figurines represented co-essences or spirit companions with which individuals shared a destiny. This suggestion builds on Joyce's (2003: 259) recognition that animal figurines may represent a “non-material part of the self.” She argued that spirit companions, which often took the form of an animal in Mesoamerican belief, were a fundamental aspect of a fully embodied self.
- 36 Also see the vocalizations that emanate from the zoomorphic creatures on Chalcatzingo Monuments 11, 8, 14, 15, 6, and 7 (Fig. 2.15a). The misty vapors that emerge from the partial quatrefoil cave depicted on Chalcatzingo Monument 1 (Figs. 2.14 and 2.15b) indicate that an interest in expressing interiority extended to places in a landscape envisioned as animate. For discussion, see Houston and Taube (2000: 254).

5 FIGURINES, FRAGMENTATION, AND SOCIAL TIES

- 1 Hodder (1993: 273), invoking White (1973), referred to culturally dominant tropes as “the deep structures of historical imagination.” Yet he also cautioned against the “unacceptable holism” that can be asserted based on the false characterization of a given period or age by one underlying trope. With these warnings in mind, I approach the trope of dismemberment as a rhetorical strategy that was invoked and materialized in a variety of ways and contexts throughout the history of Mesoamerica.
- 2 Velásquez García (2015) compared this linguistic evidence to ethnographic data collected by Pedro Pitarch Ramón (1996) among the Tzeltal Maya, which demonstrates a similar differentiation between body parts that have a shape and are vital markers of individuality and those whose *substance* is more important than their shape or form.
- 3 Jackson (2017: 580, citing Brown 2015: 59) argued that “the face is involved in multiple of the social acts that define personhood . . . for both human and non-human entities, such as eating, drinking, speaking, and seeing.” Emphasis on the head extended to burial treatments. Reese-Taylor et al. (2006: 51, 54) pointed to

- burial practices in the Maya Lowlands in which the heads of decedents appear to have been deliberately enclosed or covered, as if given special attention.
- 4 As he noted, on Yaxchilan Lintel 25, Lady K'ab'aal Xook cradles a skull – perhaps that of an ancestor – from which an ancestral deity is conjured. For the Maya these ideas could, it appears, be extended to objects that were properly inscribed. Fitzsimmons (2009: 168) observed that a mosaic mask from Calakmul Tomb 4, believed to be the resting place of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk', was inscribed with a text describing it as the “image” or “face” of Yuknoom Cheen II, his father who had preceded him on the throne. Fitzsimmons concluded that, by “carrying around – or possibly impersonating – his deceased father, Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' was portrayed in death bearing his father's image.” Miller (2007: 180) suggested that the rationale for the placement of captives' names on their thighs in Classic Maya art may be related to contemporary K'iche' beliefs that “an individual's patrilineage resides in the thigh” (Tedlock 2003: 146–147). The vital substance of bone was associated with patrilineal inheritance, while that of blood was related to the matrilineal line (Gillespie 2001: 91; Gillespie and Joyce 1997: 199; Nash 1970: 109).
 - 5 There is also a documented association between body parts and day signs in preconquest documents of the Aztecs, although the day signs are typically arrayed on the bodies of animals and supernaturals rather than humans. For discussion, see Diel (2016: 447), López Austin (1988: 348–349), and Spitler (2005: 277).
 - 6 For discussion of this material, see Aldana (2007: 101), Henne (2012: 127), Looper (2012: 207), López Austin (1988: 163–164), Stuart (2005: 68–77), Taube (2010), and Velásquez García (2006: 6).
 - 7 Also see López Austin (1988) for the lack of a body/soul dichotomy in Mesoamerican belief systems.
 - 8 Although I have not done justice to Henne's insightful arguments here, I would emphasize that his analysis demonstrates the importance in understanding the body's – or more accurately said, the *human* body's – significance as conveyed through the term *winaqirik*. As Henne (2012: 137) phrased it, “I suggest rendering *winaqirik* as the earth's ‘becoming embodied’ because this tries to capture the ‘inception’ meaning while still appealing to an English phrase that relies on a strongly metaphoric connection: the body. Further, it retains the specific metaphor of the person as the base for how we should think about and relate to the earth. The word *winaq* does not literally mean ‘body,’ but it does poetically allow for that connection because an appeal to person inherently assumes the physical body.”
 - 9 At the time of the conquest, *pux* was used to describe acts of sacrifice (Henne 2012: 142; Tedlock 1996: 227). Chinchilla (2017: 148) pointed to other passages in the Popol Vuh in which mutilation becomes generative, as when Hunahpu loses an arm to Seven Macaw or when he loses his head in the House of the Bats in Xibalba.
 - 10 Tedlock (1985: 348–349) quoted the day keeper with whom he was working, Andrés Xiloj, as saying that *tz'aqol* and *b'itol* referred, “respectively, to the amassing of clay and then its shaping into forms such as vessels or figures.”
 - 11 But see Jackson (2017: 598) who, working with Classic Maya hieroglyphic texts, noted that ceramic vessels are never labeled as “earthy” or designated with a label that emphasizes the earth as a constituent material.
 - 12 Such an observation must remain preliminary, however, as our analysis of the thousands of figurines and their many contexts is ongoing and, as a result, subject to change.
 - 13 He wrote: “Quizás el rito del sacrificio humano nació de una primitiva costumbre de destrucción ceremonial de las figurillas de cerámica.”
 - 14 It can be difficult to differentiate between ancient acts of deliberate destruction, breakage due to post-depositional processes (like soil pressure over many centuries), and more recent damage resulting from modern excavation.

- 15 Hepp and Rieger (2014: 129, fig. 5-9) also noted that tattooing patterns on coastal Oaxacan figurines underscores an emphasis on the segmentation of the body.
- 16 Patterns of deliberate breakage are also well documented during the Classic period in the Maya region. Describing figurine assemblages from Motul de San José, Guatemala, Halperin (2014: 201) suggested that “[t]heir overwhelming recovery in broken, fragmentary condition may indicate that one of the ways in which figurines were ‘worked’ was by ritually breaking or ‘killing’ the pieces during particular episodes within the calendrical or household cycle.”
- 17 For comparable acts of intentional breakage in other parts of the world, see the essays in Renfrew and Morley (2007). Also see Mountjoy (1991: 95) for intentional breakage of figurines at La Pintada in Jalisco, Mexico. He noted that the ceramic figurines in the Preclassic tombs at El Opeño, Michocacán, were also intentionally broken.
- 18 Figurines were not the only fragmented items documented by Rice. A range of vessels from small cups and dishes to large serving platters – interpreted as the remains of feasts held during communal gatherings in early ritual areas – were also broken, intermingled with figurines, and then sealed beneath plaster, probably at the termination of the feast.
- 19 In some cases, the missing body parts are attributable to deterioration of the skeleton due to the nature of the soil in the region or rodent burrowing. But in others, the skeleton is well preserved but very clearly missing one or more bones. One example, Individual 13 in Feature 96, illustrated by Arredondo (2000: fig. 3-9), reveals an otherwise relatively intact skeleton missing the metatarsals, phalanges, and some of the tarsals of its left foot (Lori Hager, personal communication, 2019), while the right foot beneath appears to be complete. There is also evidence at El Ujuxte of fragmented bodies of children, none more than six years of age, in the form of urn burials (Arredondo 2000: 42). Most consisted of only a cranium, although, in two cases, post-cranial remains were also included. Similar evidence of bodily partibility exists at Chalchuapa, El Salvador. In Late Preclassic Structure E3-7 of the El Trapiche group, a number of burials show evidence of physical mutilation, including decapitation, severed limbs, and even bodies bisected in half at the waist (Fowler 1984: 607–608).
- 20 There are a number of thoughtful meditations on fragmentation in a variety of cultures and time periods. See, for example, Barkan (1999), Hamann (2008), and Nochlin (1994). Elsner (2000: 177) viewed Late Antique Roman relics as synecdoches, or “fragments of once whole bodies” that possessed the “active, even magical, power of the whole in the part.” There are also critics who warn of the dangers of overinterpreting evidence of fragmentation. See Brittain and Harris (2010: 588), who noted that the “relationship of part to whole is not as straightforward as archaeologists tend to assume.”
- 21 Also see Blomster (2014: 82, fig. 4.2) for Cruz B “bust” figurines from Etlatongo, whose compositional form compares to the wooden busts from El Manatí (Ortiz and Rodríguez 2000).
- 22 For other examples of decapitation that carry supernatural overtones, see Houston et al.’s (2006: 61, 93) discussion of the Classic Maya deity of inebriation who decapitates his own head, or the Popol Vuh, which also describes acts of decapitation with mythic consequences (Christenson 2003). See Moser (1973) and Wilkerson (1984) for evidence beyond the Maya region.
- 23 For influential antecedents to Houston et al.’s (2006) study, focused in other geographic regions, see Meskell’s (2003) analysis of the artistic programs of ancient Egypt.
- 24 In a somewhat related vein, Kiernan (2015: 53) discussed silver and tin votives from Roman healing sanctuaries, produced en masse, which depicted parts of the body such as eyes, feet, breasts, and pregnant bellies. They were generic products, never parts of a once-whole object, and not intended to depict any one

- individual's body. But when purchased and dedicated by a worshipper, they were expected to represent that individual's body. Such notions are important to keep in mind, as they point to the many possible roles and meanings of acts of fragmentation or *pars pro toto* representations.
- 25 Similar ideas are found among native groups in the Southwest region of North America. See Schaafsma (2017: 327) for refuse mounds that are, today, "regarded as shrines associated with the ancestors and are destinations of ritual offerings."
 - 26 Lopiparo and Hendon (2009: 62–63) made a strong case for the association of mold-made figurines in the Ulúa Valley of Honduras with house renewal ceremonies.
 - 27 Overholtzer and Stoner (2011: 183) argued that the fragmented figurines at Xaltocan, which came originally from Teotihuacan and Tula, evidence an interest in "pieces of places." Their interpretation built off the work of Bradley (2000) and Helms (1993: 99), who "emphasized the symbolic and ideological power of things from geographically or socially distant places, those objects being 'marked by the inalienable qualities associated with their unusual places or sources of origin.'" Figurine fragments connected people at Xaltocan to the histories of people from distant and more ancient places (Chapman 2000: 186). Overholtzer and Stoner (2011: 186) confirmed that "no matching or refitting fragments" were found at Xaltocan, "implying that the matching fragments likely remained at the ancient site. Whether or not fragmentation was intentional, Xaltocamecas were tied to the sacred site of Teotihuacan through shared, matching fragments of the past."
 - 28 Just (2005: 78–80) further noted that acts of modification, which often targeted the faces of human representations, were at times linked to acts of conquest, iconoclasm, or deactivation that required the potency of the representation, and its implications, to be abolished. He qualified, however, that in other cases, when sculptures were thoroughly smashed and their pieces dispersed into the fill of various structures, this potency may not have transferred; instead, the sculptures were thoroughly "terminated" so as to become nothing more than structural fill, their potency "dissipated" (Just 2005: 71). See Mock (1998) for discussion of the difficulties in determining whether acts of destruction and termination were reverential in nature or intended to desecrate.
 - 29 Fitzsimmons (2009: 167) called attention to a colonial description of captive taking and sacrifice recorded by Landa in which "the hands, feet and head were reserved for the priest and his officials, and they considered those who were sacrificed as holy. If the victims were slaves captured in war, their master took their bones, to use them as a trophy in their dances as tokens of victory."
 - 30 For sacrificial practices, postmortem rituals involving human remains, and/or the removal of bones as relics from burials in Mesoamerica, see the following summaries, written from different methodological vantage points: Chinchilla (2014), Duncan and Schwarz (2014), Fitzsimmons (2009), Fitzsimmons and Shimada (2011), Geller (2004, 2012, 2014), Henderson (2013: 170–196), Houston et al. (2006), Joyce (2003), McAnany (1995), Scherer (2015), and Tiesler and Cucina (2007). There is also a robust literature addressing the "disarticulation and disaggregation of the body" (Thomas 2005: 168) for Neolithic Britain (see Lucas 1996; Thomas 2000).
 - 31 See Sahagún (1950–1982: bk. 6: 161–162): "And they who were the youths, those whose duty was warfare, ardently desired her... They considered her something wonderful... If along the road they wrestled the body of the *mocinaquetzqui* [woman who died in childbirth] from the midwives, in their presence they cut off her middle finger. And if they could dig her up by night, they also cut off her finger and they clipped off, they took her hair from her." He continued: "It was said that the hair, the finger of the *mocinaquetzqui* furnished spirit; it was said they paralyzed the feet of their foes." Sahagún further noted that the forearm

- was sometimes sought and that these women who died in childbirth were likened to warriors who ascended to the same heaven at death. See López-Austin (1988) and Hamann (2008: 811), both of whom discussed the “bits of cut hair” used to sanctify the walls of temples at Texcoco.
- 32 Maya elites also commonly incorporated the body parts of deceased ancestors and captives into their attire in the form of wearable heirlooms or trophies (Fitzsimmons 2011; Houston et al. 2006). The reuse of human remains was not limited to elite Maya, however. At Early Classic Uaxactun and Tikal, human bones were fashioned into a variety of more common objects, including “rattles, awls, punches, or other utilitarian objects,” used within the context of domestic production (Fitzsimmons 2011: 61–62).
 - 33 See examples from Caracol (Chase and Chase 1988), Salinas de los Nueve Cerros (Dillon et al. 1985), El Zotz (Román-Ramírez 2011: 61), Cahal Pech (Cheetham et al. 1994), and Las Ruinas de Arenal (Taschek and Ball 1999). Also see Scherer (2015: 153–157) for discussion.
 - 34 The placement of bodies or their pieces into the ground at one’s death may have been intended to nourish or “feed” the earth, not unlike acts of blood sacrifice performed to venerate and sustain the gods (Chinchilla 2017: 69–72). In cases such as these, fragmentation may have been linked to the reciprocal relationship between humans and the gods, whose maintenance was critical for sustaining order in the world. Earle (1986: 63) proposed that these understandings were predicated on the idea of “original debt” in which, as Chinchilla (2017: 90) summarized, humans “reap the fruits of the earth according to the terms of primeval covenants paying back by ritually feeding the earth with offerings, and eventually giving their own bodies.”
 - 35 Also see Fitzsimmons (2011: 71), who observed that at Terminal Classic Ek’ B’alam an elite lord was buried clasping a human femur whose inscription suggests that the bone came from his father (Grube et al. 2003), and Rubenstein (2015: 178–179) for discussion of a femur clasped by a dancing figure at Kabah.
 - 36 In my opinion, El Jobo Stela 1 likely came, originally, from the site of Izapa. See Guernsey (2018) for discussion.
 - 37 Niederberger (2000: 185) suggested that the Tlapacoya hands possessed ears as well. Tate (2012: 101–102) argued that this imagery lent the hands a range of sensory capabilities beyond that of touching, perhaps in reference to passages like that in the Popol Vuh in which humans were endowed with sensory capacities at the time of their creation. The eyes may also anticipate the “circles of severance” that mark points of articulation in later periods (Houston et al. 2006: 13).
 - 38 Lesure (2011: 144) underscored the significance of objects of adornment in the Preclassic period, noting that “[t]he growing differentiation involving personal ornaments raises the possibility that rank was increasingly taken to be an inseparable quality of personhood.” Costume items were central to the ways in which elites “negotiated their way through a social environment that was far different from that known just a few generations previous to their own” (Love 2011a: 74).
 - 39 Houston et al. (2006: 93–95) noted that the Hauberg Stela imagery relates to an altar from the environs of Tikal in which several dismembered bodies also appear in descending positions with “their intestines streaming out from the ragged tear along each body.” A hieroglyphic text on the stela recounts a “first penance” and “first creation” as part of a “shared trope” concerning dynastic foundings “in which apical ancestors were seen as *sacrifices* that allowed the royal dynasty to come into existence” (emphasis in original). They argued that similar imagery on a vessel from Becán, in which three severed individuals appear in association with a crocodilian creature, connects this trope to other primordial sacrifices throughout Mesoamerica involving a crocodilian beast and acts of destruction that maintained cosmic order.
 - 40 In an earlier publication, Chinchilla (2010) argued that these disembodied arms were related to the Popol Vuh myth of Seven Macaw, the avian creature who

- severed the arm of one of the Hero Twins. In his later publication, Chinchilla (2014: 5) concluded that representations of dismemberment were rare before the Postclassic period. However, his assessment overlooks the widespread patterns of dismemberment that characterize figurine use as well as references to bodily fragmentation that appear in the artistic record already by the Preclassic period.
- 41 Pasztory noted, however, that humans, for the most part, are portrayed as much more whole or complete than deities.
- 42 Related ideas persisted into the Postclassic period, as on Aztec stone tablets depicting amputated limbs that likely referenced mythic accounts of the dismemberment of the goddess Coyolxauhqui at the hands of her brother Huitzilopochtli (Chinchilla 2014; Hernández Pons and Navarrete 1997; Mundy 1998: 20). Also see Baquedano (2011: 219, fig. 7.8), who described a Postclassic vessel from Santa Cecilia Acatitlán, probably a *cuanhxicalli* or receptacle for human hearts or body parts, whose circumference is decorated with dismembered limbs and a heart, among other symbols.
- 43 One wonders if ideas concerning bodily division apply to the many articulated figurines recovered from Teotihuacan. According to von Winning (1991: 64), the earliest articulated figurines at Teotihuacan – with separately made limbs attached to the body through a set of strings inserted through perforations in the torso – were found during excavations of the Pyramid of the Sun and assigned to the Late Tzacualli–Miccaotli phase. Early hand-modeled articulated figurines are rare at Teotihuacan; by the Late Tlamimilolpa and Early Xolalpan phases, they were mold-made and more common. Von Winning argued that articulated figurines at Teotihuacan were associated, in particular, with funerary practices.
- 44 See Henderson (2013) for further discussion.
- 45 Karnava's (2015: 148) arguments hinged on the demonstration that “striking and close similarities to Cretan Hieroglyphic signs” existed with the fragmentary votive objects.
- 46 The term *chaîne opératoire* was first utilized in lithic studies and refers to a method in which archaeologists seek “to define stages in the fabrication of a product, each of which can be recognized by diagnostic débitage” (Gaydarska et al. 2007: 171).
- 47 My discussion here includes examples of objects that others might refer to as “heirlooms” or “relics.” In modern scholarship, these terms are often entangled with discussions of relative alienability or inalienability. Weiner (1992: 6) defined inalienable possessions as those objects that are “imbued with intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners which are not easy to give away. Ideally, these inalienable possessions are kept by their owners from one generation to the next within the closed context of family, descent group, or dynasty.” Alienable objects, by contrast, are less closely linked to an individual's social identity. I avoid this distinction in recognition of the sheer variety and multivalent functionality of the objects under consideration in this general discussion of the enchainment model.
- 48 As Brittain and Harris (2010: 585) acknowledged, Chapman (2000: 27) concurred that enchainment and fragmentation are “not necessarily a consequence of each other.”
- 49 Also see a ritual celebrated during the seventeenth month of the calendar that involved a performance in which participants danced with the head of a sacrificed woman (Sahagún 1950–1982: bk. 2: 5, 19, 31).
- 50 Other passages in Sahagún (1950–1982: bk. 4: 101) address dismemberment in association with divination. Such stories are often associated with evil omens, sorcery, guardians of secret rituals, and “masters of the spoken word,” and are best viewed through a lens that takes into consideration the colonizing and proselytizing mission of many of the authors of these accounts.
- 51 Here Bynum (1991: 269) refers to the writings of the Parisian theologian Gervase of Mt.-St.-Eloi, who admitted that, although “divine power could gather scattered parts . . . it was better to bury bodies intact so they were ready for the sound of the trumpet.”

- 52 Quoted from James of Voragine (1890: 400–403). Themes of dismemberment are also featured in Dante Alighieri’s fourteenth-century epic poem the *Divine Comedy*.
- 53 Also see Stanzione (2003: 59) for stories of the Mam that involve the loss of either his left hand or left foot in a battle waged against an earth monster on behalf of the people of Atitlán.
- 54 Similarly, the insertion of a foot on top of a temple portrayed in the Codex of Yanhuitlán signifies the town of San Andrés Sachio, Oaxaca (Monaghan 1994: 95).
- 55 See Campbell et al. (1986: 549) for further discussion of locatives derived from body parts in Mesoamerican languages.
- 56 Long (2011) argued that the broken state and location of figurines at La Blanca in household middens and architectural fill of structures like massive Mound 1 is distinct from the special treatment that would be expected of inalienable ritual paraphernalia.
- 57 See Rice (2015) for a comparable discussion of the relationship between figurine fragments and monumental construction in the Preclassic Maya Lowlands.
- 58 The efficacy of using objects as narrative clues to point to or connect narrative segments, and the burden of the reader in making these connections, is often discussed in literary circles. For one particularly good example, see Yee (2010: 1), who described how, in the writings of Flaubert, the reader/actor “is solicited in order to establish links between different occurrences of the same object, or closely related objects reappearing within a paradigm.”
- 59 For discussion with regard to Mesoamerica, see Blomster (2011), Houston et al. (2006), and Long (2011).

6 CHANGING DISCOURSES OF HUMAN REPRESENTATION IN LATE PRECLASSIC MESOAMERICA

- 1 My caution, here, is deliberate, and I am cognizant of White’s (1987: 60) statement that historians “in general do not claim to have discovered the kinds of causal laws that would permit them to explain phenomena by viewing them as instantiations of the operations of such laws, in the way that physical scientists do in their explanations.”
- 2 See Bove (1981, 1989, 2005) and Love (1991, 1999a, 2002a, b, 2011, 2016). Rosenswig has assembled comparable data for Izapa and environs but employs the term “kingdom” to describe “a hierarchical polity ruled by a king,” thereby avoiding the “sterile typological issue of whether Izapa was a complex chiefdom or an archaic state” (Rosenwig et al. 2018).
- 3 Baines and Yoffee (1998: 254) used the term “state” to signify a central, governing institution within a stratified society. They noted that the term “civilization” can be conceptually linked to these ideas in the sense that it denotes “the overarching social order in which state governance exists and is legitimized.” The term “civilization,” as they clarified, does not exclude the potential for social resistance, but instead embraces it as a logical outgrowth of the participation of numerous social groups in a diverse “community of interests within the civilizations.” Also see Van Buren and Richard’s (2000: 5) use of the term “civilization.”
- 4 For the history of the dating of Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 11, which was found buried beneath the floors of a courtyard associated with Mound B-III-12, see Henderson (2013: 241). Parsons (1986: 66–69) assigned it to the Verbena phase.
- 5 For a summary of these lengthy arguments and the many authors who have contributed to them, see Guernsey (2006b, n.d.), Hellmuth (1986: 201, 247), Henderson (2013), Houston et al. (2006: 236), Nielson and Helmke (2015), Taube et al. (2010: 30), and Zender (2005).

- 6 For example, the Late Preclassic murals of San Bartolo, in the Petén region of Guatemala, portray similar scenes involving the Principal Bird Deity (Saturno et al. 2005; Taube et al. 2010). On the west wall of the Las Pinturas structure, the bird descends from the sky and lands in the branches of a tree. The bird's descent into a tree, repeated four times across the west wall, is linked to another overarching theme of the murals, which is the establishment of a four-part cosmology (Taube et al. 2010: 12, 19–20). Across Mesoamerica, this four-part cosmology was manifested physically, as in the cardinal directions, but also temporally, as in the rhythm of the calendar with its four “year bearers,” which ushered in the first day of the solar year. At Izapa, I would argue, these same cosmological tenets were expressed through the organization of monuments throughout quadrilateral plazas that reflect the four-fold establishment of space. Narratives concerning rulers and mythic creatures like the Principal Bird Deity were inserted into this space, where they further structured the physical contours of the urban environment and the people within it (Guernsey 2006b, n.d.). These narratives invoking the Principal Bird Deity repeated at Izapa, appearing not only on Stela 4, but also on Stelae 2, 25, 60, and Altar 4.
- 7 In a discussion of ancient Egypt, Baines (2007: 296) reminded readers that “[m]uch of the core of high culture was in oral forms and in ritual. So long as continuous language was not written down, these domains retained their ideological precedence and now escape the archaeological record, while monumental representational forms only ever presented small excerpts from ritual.” His reminder pertains just as well to ancient Mesoamerica.
- 8 Stela 1 was positioned along the base of Mound 58 at the southern end of the Group A plaza, adjacent to a drainage system at the southeast corner of the courtyard that served to eliminate standing water, a perennial problem in this region of high annual precipitation (Gómez Rueda 1995; Lowe et al. 1982: fig. 8.8).
- 9 The handful of Late Preclassic images focused on captive taking or display provide a counterpoint to messages emphasizing the political authority of rulers or its mythological justification. Scenes of aggression like that of Stela 21, while rare, appear to have been a necessary component of political charter and part of “an elaborate material symbol system . . . shared and recognized by antagonist and protagonist alike” (Freidel 1986: 95). When placed in conversation with the archaeological data, the scenes remind us that urban centers were likely compelled to act, sometimes violently, with regional competitors (Guernsey 2018).
- 10 It is also important to remember that Late Preclassic stone sculpture did not just narrate bodily fragmentation; it was subjected to dismemberment in and of itself. This, again, was not an invention of the Late Preclassic period, but rather a continuation of far more ancient practices like those documented by Grove (1981: 41, 61–61) and Angulo (1987) at Middle Preclassic Chalcatzingo. Norman (1976: 3) described the “deliberate defacing” of twelve monuments at Izapa, while Lowe et al. (1982: 89) noted that it targeted “the faces of principal personages.” Norman suggested, however, that the effacement of monuments at Izapa contrasted with the “outright breaking up of monuments” at Kaminaljuyu, a pattern that persisted throughout that site's long history (Doering and Collins 2010: 274–279). The fracturing of Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 10 into several fragments must have taken considerable effort, as Henderson (2013: 121–129) noted, as did the dispersal of the pieces to locations 700 m distant (Parsons 1986: 66, 69). Narrative monuments were not the only targets of destruction throughout southeastern Mesoamerica: a number of potbelly sculptures at both paramount and secondary sites reveal evidence of similar violent acts, often involving decapitation. See, for example, potbellies from Pasaco, Takalik Abaj, El Ujuxte, Kaminaljuyu, and Agua Escondida in Guernsey (2012: figs. 4.13, 4.16, 4.22, 4.26, 4.27, 4.31, 4.33).

- 11 Bove contrasted sites in the Escuintla region, which lack narrative stelae (but do possess plain stelae and potbelly monuments), to sites like Takalik Abaj in Retalhuleu that featured a diversity of sculpture and numerous narrative stelae with hieroglyphic inscriptions. Bove (2011: 100–101) attributed these differences in sculptural expression to competing “cultural” and “ideological systems”: while Takalik Abaj was characterized by a centrally controlled political economy, the region further to the east in Escuintla was populated by more fragmented, competitive, and smaller centers. Data on figurine densities at Takalik Abaj are lacking, as is sustained excavation in domestic sectors or areas of habitation beyond the site’s ceremonial center. Nevertheless, extant data from throughout the Pacific Coast and piedmont of Guatemala suggest that a Late Preclassic figurine cessation was quite consistent throughout the region in spite of the fact that different centers diverged considerably in terms of size, relative regional authority, and political structure.
- 12 Ekholm (1989: 33) reported one figurine from a cache in Mound 59 and mentioned several others that may date to the Late Preclassic period but qualified that, following the Guillén phase, the figurine tradition disappeared at Izapa. Clark and Lee (2013: 80, 95, fig. 82) attributed several fragments and one complete figurine to the Guillén phase and also noted the potential heirlooming of figurines in Feature 60-1 of Mound 60. More recently, Mendelsohn (2017: 133, 136–137) documented figurine fragments in a layer of domestic debris at the base of Mound 255 in Group I at Izapa, one of which was Olmec in style and the other a hollow figurine whose ceramic paste shared affinities with Hato-phase ceramics. She suggested that the Olmec-style figurine, like the one in Feature 60-1, might have been an heirloom deposited during the Hato phase, but cautioned against assigning an unambiguous date to the other figurine given its problematic context.
- 13 This same view was echoed by Inomata et al. (2015: 12) in their discussion of evidence from Ceibal. Exceptions to this rule, however, may exist. Hammond (1991: 233) noted that the presence of figurines in Cocos phase contexts at Cuello, Belize, contrasted with “the paucity of human figurines noted elsewhere for the Late Preclassic.” Acknowledging their lack of a sealed context, however, he cautioned that they could have been deposited in earlier periods.
- 14 Smith and Montiel (2008: 264) clarified that figurines crafted in a local style declined toward the end of the Late Preclassic period, at which time there was a surge in Teotihuacan-style figurines at Yautepec.
- 15 Seiferle-Valencia (2007: 119–121) commented on the fragmented nature of all of the figurines recovered from Cuauhtinchan Viejo, which she attributed to deliberate dismembering and decapitation as part of their ritual disposal. She also noted that Cuauhtinchan Viejo figurines bore a striking resemblance to those from Totimhuacán, Puebla, also dated to the Middle and Late Preclassic periods (see Carballo 2016: 91–92), as well as to those from Chalcatzingo.
- 16 Marchegay (2014: 299) addressed 1,465 figurines and figurine fragments from cultural deposits at Loma Real and an additional 699 examples from destroyed areas of the site.
- 17 Estrada de la Cerda noted that the pottery in Tombs I and II was much finer than that in the tomb at the base of Mound E-III-3, which he characterized as more utilitarian.
- 18 Also see Brockington (2001: 1), who suggested that, along the Oaxaca coast, “Preclassic style” figurines survived well into the Classic period and that there was a continued use of “Olmec-style elements” long after their disappearance in other regions.
- 19 In spite of these developments, however, scholars have refrained from characterizing any of the sites in this region as “states” (Hepp 2007: 40; A. Joyce and Barber 2015).
- 20 The calibrated date ranges I am using for these Teotihuacan phases come from Cowgill (2015).

- 21 The single complete figurine was, however, broken at the neck (Mountjoy 1991: 89). All but three of the 892 figurines from La Pintada represent humans, and all were found in contexts of mixed domestic refuse that contained grinding stones, pottery, earpools, whistles, items of personal adornment, and carbonized food remains (Mountjoy 1991: 95).
- 22 Markedly different patterns of figurine use between adjacent regions characterize other parts of the world as well, as an example from Japan illustrates. Toward the end of the Middle Period in the Jomon period (2500–1500 BC), there was a drastic reduction in the production and use of figurines in the Chubu region (Mizoguchi 2017: 535–536, 539). These changes coincided with a collapse in regional social structures, population movements, and climatic deterioration. To the west, however, where in previous years there had been a general scarcity of figurines, a marked expansion in their use emerged. This development paralleled the formation of new regional core settlements. Mizoguchi (2017: 536) concluded that figurine use, as a “technology,” was suited to dealing with “certain types of contingency,” but when that condition “either ceased to exist or was weakened,” the technology was no longer deemed necessary.
- 23 I do not consider in this study the site of Tamtoc in the state of San Luis Potosí, Mexico, which developed into a major urban center by at least the Late Preclassic period (Córdova Tello et al. 2012). The monumental stone sculpture and traditions of ceramic figurines there provide another rich opportunity for exploring the role of figuration, albeit one beyond the scope of this book.
- 24 The larger and far less prevalent “hollow baby” figures at La Blanca likewise have a restricted distribution in elite households, which again suggests that certain types of figural ceramic traditions correlate with socioeconomic status.
- 25 I doubt, however, that these shifts occurred at one particular place or at one particular moment in time. If, whether through production or distribution, La Blanca figurines were controlled by elites – and this possibility exists, for now, only in the realm of conjecture – then it makes sense to entertain the notion that elites were already cognizant of the social power of human representations, even small ones of clay. But we must also acknowledge that this recognition did not result, at least at La Blanca, in a lack of access to figurines across the general population.
- 26 Although marketplaces are not archaeologically demonstrated for the Preclassic period in this region, their existence is entirely plausible, and there is evidence from later periods for the distribution of figurines in marketplaces. See Halperin, Bishop, et al. (2009) and Sullivan (2007).
- 27 That said, there is evidence for circumscribed clay procurement zones at a site like K’axob, Belize. According to Bartlett and McAnany (2000: 116), Middle Preclassic K’axob ceramics were chemically diverse and came from non-local clays or clay deposits further than 7 km from the site. However, by the Late Preclassic period, the clay resources utilized were increasingly similar to those found near the site center.
- 28 The El Ujuxte ceramic dish compares to monoscenic narrative compositions in clay at Monte Albán, described by Martínez López and Winter (1994: fig. 86a), which appeared there sometime during the Middle to Late Preclassic transition. Comparable narrative exploration in the form of ceramic objects also characterized West Mexico during the Late Preclassic period (Gross 2018).
- 29 But we should also be wary of overemphasizing stone’s capacity to endure. As Lewis Mumford (1938: 434) wrote, stone “gives a false sense of continuity, a deceptive assurance of life.”
- 30 Essays in Insoll’s (2017) edited volume address the formal and conceptual relationships between figurines and ceramics and their use of three-dimensionally modeled figural representations. I do not do justice to these interrelationships for Preclassic Mesoamerica. They warrant more sustained scrutiny and attest to the need for flexible systems of analysis that are not constrained to a single medium or format of expression.

- 31 Also see Popenoe de Hatch (1989: fig. II.4c). For further examples, see an Early Preclassic vessel from Tlatilco (Feuchtwanger 1989: fig. 105) or a vessel from Guerrero interred sometime during the Middle Preclassic period (Martínez Donjuán 1994: fig. 9.5). Examples of Middle Preclassic modeled human faces on pottery, like those at La Blanca, likely grew out of even earlier ceramic traditions that featured anthropomorphic faces modeled three dimensionally. Early Preclassic ceramic “masks,” like those from Paso de la Amada (Lesure 2000: figs. 11.7, 11.8), are another potential antecedent. They depict anthropomorphic visages, sometimes with supernatural elements such as rectangular eyes, and demonstrate a sustained interest in modeling anthropomorphic faces in fully three-dimensional form. At Paso de la Amada, some effigy vessels depict faces that combine animal and human attributes (see Lesure 2000: 200, fig. 8). Although they are not purely human, like the ones at La Blanca, they share an interest in anthropomorphic features such as ears, ear ornaments, and headdresses.
- 32 It is perhaps worth noting that we have two examples at Middle Preclassic La Blanca of reworked ceramic sherds, 3–5 cm in height, which take the form of human figures. They are very simplified, flat, and lacking in any incised details; their only coloration is that of the original vessel, of which they are but a small fragment. They resemble, for lack of a better analogy, gingerbread men, with simplified heads and stubby appendages that project from stout torsos. They are exceedingly rare, as to date we have identified only two examples among several hundred worked sherds believed to have functioned as fishing weights, most of which are oblong, round, or notched (Love 2016: figs. 3.5–3.7). Nevertheless, these two unusual worked sherds were part of a figural tradition that took advantage – at least on rare occasion – of pottery fragments to fashion anthropomorphic representations.
- 33 A similar effigy vessel from Sacatepéquez was illustrated by Shook and Popenoe de Hatch (1999: fig. 120e). Also see Estrada de la Cerda (2017: fig. 33) for Sacatepéquez Rojo vessels with modeled human figural elements from the tomb at the base of Kaminaljuyu Mound E-III-3.
- 34 The effigy heads on these “portable hearths” bear features closely linked to earlier figurine traditions as well as potbelly sculptures (discussed in the next chapter; also see Guernsey 2012: 140).
- 35 Vessels from Kaminaljuyu Mound E-III-3 that possess purely two-dimensional incisions appear to eschew human representation and, instead, focus on animals and abstract designs. Representations of quadrupeds are particularly interesting in this regard. Some are rendered fully dimensional, in effigy form (Shook and Kidder 1952: figs. 30, 35, and 76m; also see, at Izapa, fish effigy rims in Lowe et al. 2013: fig. 27), while others reveal a sustained interest in increasing abstraction. Several illustrated by Shook and Kidder (1952: fig. 18; also see Parsons 1967: fig. 28a) display the bodies in *pars pro toto* fashion, reduced to a simple central circle surrounded by four appendages radiating outward. Representations of animals thus appear to fluctuate more freely between two and three dimensions on Late Preclassic pottery than do those of humans.
- 36 The fragmentary nature of most ceramic evidence also exacerbates the situation; any sweeping generalization stands on precarious ground.
- 37 These tensions between two and three dimensions in anthropomorphic representations on pottery were not new to the Late Preclassic period. An Escalon–Frontera phase vessel at Izapa (Lowe et al. 2013: fig. 22, top) displays a modeled visage with incised details that resemble a beard. Also see Clark and Cheetham (2005: fig. 18) for a Cherla phase example. Modeled anthropomorphic faces continued into the Guillén phase at Izapa (Lowe et al. 2013: fig. 30). An incised grey ware bowl from Yugüé, Oaxaca, further indicates that the two-dimensional rendering of anthropomorphic individuals on ceramics occurred by the end of the Preclassic period in some regions (Barber and Olvera Sánchez 2012: fig. 14). The mouth of the anthropomorph is not rendered naturalistically, however, which may indicate that this individual was not purely human and possessed supernatural attributes.

- 38 There were also rich traditions of masks made from a variety of materials, many of which took the form of disembodied heads. Although some might have been worn, others “lack eye perforations or are of insufficient size to cover a face” (Taube 2004: 145). See Benson and de la Fuente (1996: figs. 77–82, 96), Lesure (2009: figs. 11.7, 11.8), and Taube (2004: plates 29, 33).
- 39 Sculptures like the 17-cm-tall Monument 119 from San Lorenzo (Cyphers 2004: fig. 135) challenge our understandings: surrounding the face of this fragmentary anthropomorph is a series of visages, perhaps human, which peer outward. But the meaning of this unusual ornamentation – if, indeed, it can even be characterized as such – is difficult to discern. For another example of figural ornamentation, see the headdress and earflaps of La Venta Monument 44 (Tate 2012: fig. 8.23).
- 40 For other examples of figural ornamentation, see the offering in Mound 60, the tallest pyramid at Izapa, which includes an anthropomorphic bead carved from imperial green jade (Clark and Lee 2013: 89, fig. 75). Its mixed context, however, is problematic, and Clark and Lee refrained from assigning it unambiguously to the Middle to Late Preclassic transition. At Chiapa de Corzo, an Istmo phase effigy necklace comprised of thirteen long bones carved with faces was recovered, as was a jade pendant in the form of a human hand from Horcones phase Tomb 5 (Lee 1969: figs. 117, 99).
- 41 *Camahuiles* were also discovered at El Ujuxte in Pitahaya phase (100 BC–AD 100) domestic trash deposits (Love 2010: fig. 7.22). The tallest and most complete of the two, found in association with an elite residence, measures between 11 and 12 cm in height and, like other related objects found throughout Mesoamerica, portrays a human figure with schematically rendered anatomy and facial features. The second, found in a household at “the middle of El Ujuxte’s socioeconomic scale” (Love 2010: 171), is more fragmentary and missing its head. *Camahuiles*, or related anthropomorphic stone figures dubbed “Charlie Chaplin” figures by Thompson (1931), appear throughout many regions of Mesoamerica during the Late Preclassic period (and beyond; see Orellana 1981) in a variety of contexts, although relatively few have been documented along the Pacific slope. Mora-Marín (2015) argued that the *camahuile* form may have originated with the Middle Preclassic Olmec, eventually becoming truly pan-Mesoamerican and extending further south into Central America. Along the Pacific slope, *camahuiles* have been documented at Santa Leticia, El Salvador, where Demarest (1986: 209, fig. 118) encountered one, 3 cm tall, drilled for suspension, in a bell-shaped trash pit. As he noted, comparable specimens appear at Chalchuapa (Sheets and Dahlin 1978: 46) and Quelepa (Andrews 1976: 167–168), although, at Quelepa, the object consists of only a head. Mora-Marín (2015: 25) suggested that such pendants, sometimes referred to as “diadem jewels,” served as *pars pro toto* representations of *camahuiles*. At the site of El Bálsamo, Guatemala, Shook and Popenoe de Hatch (1978: fig. 4a) found a similar jade head pendant whose schematic features compare closely to those of *camahuiles*, and noted that it indicates “the use of valuable imported trade material for personal adornment” by the advent of the Late Preclassic period.
- 42 This passage concerning the fall of the wooden people in the Popol Vuh culminates in a section in which animals and even objects, from grinding stones to griddles and pots, rebel against them (Christenson 2003: 87–89). Jackson (2017: 593) characterized this “revolt of the objects” passage as one in which the wooden people were “subject to breakage by their own belongings.”
- 43 Many Mesoamerican scholars have written of the interrelationships between time, the supernatural realm, and dynastic proclamations. For a sampling of this literature from different methodological perspectives, see Eberl (2015), Rice (2004: 56–83), Stuart (2011: 252–282), and B. Tedlock (1992).
- 44 There is a lengthy and fascinating literature devoted to discussion of ritual efficacy, reliability, rationalization, and disenchantment. It extends well beyond the scope of this book but could be applied to interesting effect, in my opinion, to the transformations visible in the archaeological and visual record at the cusp of

- the Late Preclassic period along the south coast. For a summary of the issues at stake and their indebtedness to Max Weber's ideas concerning efficacious ritual practices, see Geertz (1973: 170–189) and Boudon (2001). I thank Josefrayn Sánchez-Perry for bringing several of these sources to my attention.
- 45 Christenson (2007: 72 n. 114) clarified that the K'iche' word *poj*, which he translated as “effigy,” refers to any object “fashioned in the likeness of a human, such as a doll or scarecrow. Tedlock translates the word as ‘maniken,’ Recinos as ‘figure,’ and Edmondson as ‘doll.’”
- 46 Later, in ancient Rome, Cicero also engaged with similar apprehensions concerning the threat of private veneration to officially sanctioned religion. For discussion, see Bodel (2012). Faraone (2012) addressed the role of women and magic in household cults. See Boedeker (2012: 236–239) for similar tensions in classical Athenian plays between “family” and “state” religion as well as between “female-dominated and subversive domestic practices” and “civic religion.” This book is not the place to contemplate the gendered nature of similar tensions in Late Preclassic Mesoamerica, but it is one worth pursuing, especially in light of the fact that the attention to female bodies in figurine practices gave way to one in which the typically male bodies of rulers became the locus of power.
- 47 For the economic significance of Classic-period figurines, which may have been distributed in a variety of venues including state rituals, festivals, or markets, see Halperin (2014: 143–185). As I mentioned in Chapter 5, we do not yet have the data to reconstruct the “political economies” of figurines from the Preclassic Pacific slope. Halperin's arguments, however, provide valuable insight into the ways in which these small objects factored into the political economies of the Classic period in the Maya Lowlands. Also see Lesure (1999) for the economics of figurine production in Early Preclassic Mazatán and, for a more temporally distant model, Stocker (1991a: 145) for discussion of the extraordinarily large regional distribution of Postclassic Mazapan figurines.
- 48 For an excellent discussion of the various potential roles of commoners in the negotiation of social power, and a review of pertinent social theory, see A. Joyce et al. (2001).
- 49 Gillespie argued that this was visualized during the Late Classic period through a new attention to the physicality of the bodies of rulers, in terms of not only their representation but also a new attention to their semiotic and phenomenological aspects. The bodies of rulers became more than “blank surfaces,” more than “frameworks for the right assortment of symbols.” They were produced “out of intersubjective performances and practices in interactions with the material world and other social persons” (Gillespie 2008b: 129). She further argued that the Classic Maya royal body took on a collective “totalizing quality,” which encompassed “society, history, [and] the cosmos” (Gillespie 2008b: 131).
- 50 For discussion of alternative burial practices, see Uruñuela and Plunket (2002: 30) and Geller (2004).
- 51 This contrast in burial data between La Blanca and El Ujuxte is not merely the result of issues of preservation: there is little variability between these neighboring sites in terms of soil acidity or moisture. Nor is it due to a lack of investigation in the domestic sector of La Blanca (Love 2002b). Only following the decline of La Blanca, when Late Preclassic groups occupied the site, do burial practices begin to resemble those documented at nearby El Ujuxte.

7 HIGH CULTURE AND HUMAN REPRESENTATION IN LATE PRECLASSIC MESOAMERICA

- 1 Occasionally, Izapa compositions eschew a human protagonist and a few portray purely abstract designs (Guernsey 2006b), but they are in the minority. Most carved stelae at Izapa include either a kingly body or a supernatural one that takes anthropomorphic form.

- 2 For discussion, see Doering and Collins (2010), Fahsen (2002), Guernsey (2018), Henderson (2013: 212–216), Kaplan (2000: 186–191), and Parsons (1986: 57–58). Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 65's complex history of carving, erasure, and destruction has also been addressed by several scholars (Doering and Collins 2010; Henderson 2013: 129–130; Kaplan 2000).
- 3 A related composition characterizes Takalik Abaj Stela 5, whose sides each portray an individual, one of whom is enthroned, the other seated on the ground (Guernsey 2018).
- 4 Although Assmann was focused on textual descriptions, his ideas concerning the ways in which references to concrete locations in the landscape serve to situate cultural memory translate well to the Late Preclassic visual record. Izapa Stelae 3, 6, 22, 26, and 67, which depict canoes, likely also evidence a pictorial strategy through which reference was made to nearby coastal estuaries, which were central to Izapa's economic well-being (Guernsey 2016). Comparable devices were employed by Late Preclassic artists in the Maya Lowlands. The remarkably life-like oropendola nest painted on the north wall of San Bartolo Las Pinturas Structure Sub-1 referenced the local, natural environment in which the nests of these birds can be seen with great regularity. More than that, however, its shape may have signaled a deeper meaning in keeping with the flowering cave to its left, which Saturno et al. (2005) identified as the mythical location of "Flower Mountain." Especially pendulous oropendola nests indicate a mild rainy season with low winds and mild storms. By contrast, short and contracted nests occur during seasons associated with gusty winds and fiercer storms (Paul Amaroli, personal communication, 2013). Subtle pictorial details like these situated Late Preclassic viewers in local, recognizable places or environments and even encoded meteorological information.
- 5 While all of the actors on Sculpture 10 were given attributes that allude to their divine status, they were also rendered in fundamentally anthropomorphic terms. Henderson (2013: 238) asserted, echoing de la Fuente (1977: 217), that Sculpture 10 provides "a perfect bridge" between human bodies, divine bodies, and the stone bodies that these monuments constituted.
- 6 These ideas relate to those presented by Bourdieu (1984) concerning consumption, taste, social reproduction, and structures of power. Bourdieu recognized that, as Featherstone et al. (1999: 66) discussed, "to be dominant is to be able to determine that what a society values as having distinction will be those same qualities which members of that group are able to display, thus reproducing their own domination as legitimated 'distinction.'"
- 7 These first-tier centers include Izapa, Kaminaljuyu, Takalik Abaj, Cotzumalguapa, and Chalchuapa. See Guernsey (2018) for discussion of the likely origins of El Jobo Monument 1 at Izapa, which would otherwise represent an exception to this rule given that El Jobo appears to have been a secondary site within the greater Izapa polity.
- 8 There was also a wealth of zoomorphic and non-figural innovation in the Late Preclassic period, as illustrated by Parsons (1986). That said, it is the human body that continued to dominate the representational field throughout the Late Preclassic period.
- 9 See Kaplan (1995: 186), who wrote that thrones at Kaminaljuyu belong to "the class of sculptures from Kaminaljuyu traditionally called 'table altars' or 'rectangular altars.'" Parsons (1986: 55) referred to these simply as "altars," although in a few instances (see his analysis of Kaminaljuyu Altar 8) he included the term "throne" in parentheses. Also see Lowe et al. (1982: 95) and Norman (1976: 251) for discussion. Clark et al. (2010) noted that during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods, relatively small, four-legged thrones appear in the archaeological record with increasing frequency. Their antecedents were probably the more massive tabletop "altars" from Olmec sites such as San Lorenzo and La Venta that Grove (1973; also see Gillespie 1999) convincingly argued served as

“thrones.” La Venta Monument 15, which likely dates to the end of the Middle Preclassic period, is an example of a small, free-standing legged throne that, in spite of its fragmentary condition, is directly comparable to Late Preclassic examples from the Pacific Coast (Drucker 1952: plate 64). Portability may have been an inspiration for the decreasing size of thrones throughout the Preclassic period (Cyphers 1999: 170). Monument 15 also illustrates an interest in the smooth, planar surface of the throne’s seat for detailed iconography, a trend that would continue during the Late Preclassic.

- 10 So, too, monuments that once had legs are now often missing them, and others, such as Kaminaljuyu Monument 1923, reveal cavities on their undersides where legs would, originally, have been inserted (Kaplan 1995: 188). Cyphers (2004: 111) preferred the neutral term *losa*, “slab,” to describe objects such as San Lorenzo Monuments 16 and 64 (Cyphers 2004: figs. 34, 77), since it effectively sidestepped debates of functionality and was freed from the baggage associated with words like “altar” or “throne.”
- 11 For a map showing the distribution of throne representations, see Clark et al. (2010: fig. 1.10).
- 12 Chalchuapa Monument 6 was identified by Anderson (1978: 156, fig. 6a) as a “ceremonial metate” based on the subtly sloping surface of its top. Although broken, two legs are still intact and visible. Its width of 79 cm from one finished edge to the other compares to that of other Late Preclassic thrones like Izapa Throne 1, whose width is 98 cm. Based on this, I would agree with Parsons (1986: 59) that this is a fragmentary throne rather than a ceremonial metate.
- 13 Some Late Preclassic thrones eschew human representation, instead portraying supernatural characters and/or themes. See, for example, the “Shook Fragment” (Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 171) (Henderson 2013: 311) or Izapa Throne 1 (Norman 1973: plate 63).
- 14 Throne 2 was found at the west end of the Group F ball court where it had been relocated anciently (Norman 1976: 255). Norman compared Izapa Throne 2 to Tres Zapotes Monument G, also dated to the Late Preclassic period (Pool 2010: 111–112; Porter 1989a; Stirling 1943: plate 8b).
- 15 See Kaplan (2011) for discussion of Kaminaljuyu’s outsized thrones and Kaplan (1995: fig. 14) for what remains of the legs on the underside of Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 10. Henderson (2013: 242) offers further discussion.
- 16 Henderson (2013: 158–159) discerned that different hands carved the text and imagery of the monument, each with a distinct level of skill. She disagreed with Parsons (1986: 69), however, that a significant period of time necessarily separated these carving events.
- 17 Vestiges of a similar vertical text are visible on Kaminaljuyu Sculpture 1.
- 18 Coe and Kerr (1997: 67) and Graham et al. (1978: 92) placed the date recorded on Takalik Abaj Stela 5 in the year AD 126; Justeson (personal communication, 1997) and Mora-Marín (2001: 247–248; 2010), however, suggested a date of AD 125. Proskouriakoff (1950: 110) argued that this compositional format anticipates later Classic period sculpture, which might indicate that Sculptures 1 and 12 were some of the latest bas-relief carvings to have been produced at Kaminaljuyu (see Henderson 2013: 17–18 and Parsons 1986: 61).
- 19 Graham and Benson (2005: 355) questioned whether Takalik Abaj Altar 12 was originally conceived as an altar, although, as they noted, Graham had previously asserted that the horizontal orientation of the glyphs on the sides argue against a vertical orientation.
- 20 See Love (2010: 167) and Ericastilla et al. (2000) for the story of these monuments’ discovery; they now reside in a mall in Coatepeque, Guatemala, adjacent to the Paiz grocery store. Izapa Altar 16 (Norman 1976: fig. 5.8) also depicts a crab.
- 21 While one should not rule out the possibility that the human figure on Las Conchitas Altar 1 was a detail added in later periods, there is no evidence to confirm this one way or the other. Michael Love (personal communication,

- 2018) suggested that Las Conchitas may have been a residential zone linked to the nearby (and larger) site of La Felicidad, which boasts some monumental architecture. See the map in Love (2010: fig. 7.12).
- 22 Love suggested that the object might represent a percussion instrument, a suggestion supported by comparison to a musician painted on a Classic period polychrome vase (see Kerr #5027 in the Kerr archive of rollout photographs of Classic Maya vessels at <http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya.html>, accessed August 12, 1997). Elliot Lopez Finn (personal communication, 2015) suggested that the band of triangles marking the circumference of Altar 1 might allude to the skin of a drum, pulled tightly across the top and, by extension, carry further associations with performance. Ericastilla et al. (2000: 160) suggested that the object carried in the hand of the individual is an obsidian blade. I find the musician/drum interpretation most compelling.
 - 23 Olmec footprints rendered in stone are not limited to those of humans. San Lorenzo Monument SL-106, perhaps once part of a staircase, reveals three avian footprints, like tracks in the sand, etched into the stone's surface (Cyphers 2004: fig. 117).
 - 24 Fu et al. (2019), following the lead of Malmström (1976), documented the magnetization of certain features of the potbelly monuments at Monte Alto, specifically their corpulent stomach/navel regions as well as their right cheek/temples. They argued that the lightning-induced magnetization of the boulders would have been detectable to ancient Mesoamericans through the use of an iron-ore mirror lodestone, which would have been deflected if suspended close to the surface of the sculptures. The areas of magnetic deflection closely correspond with key features of the potbellies that I argued linked them to an iconography of deceased yet enduringly vital ancestors (Guernsey 2012). Fu and colleagues (2019: 35) concluded that “the ability of the potbellies to deflect, dramatically in most cases, a suspended lodestone would have served to reinforce their message of living ancestral continuity.”
 - 25 They typify a phenomenon described by Van Buren and Richards (2000: 9, citing Helms 1993) in which “[c]ivilized elites often attempt to create a legitimizing cultural genealogy, even in the face of variation and discontinuity, in order to generate the illusion of great antiquity.” Similar use of ancestral claims in order to justify social and political authority can be found around the globe. See Maxwell's (2007: 197–211) discussion of how discourses of ancestry were employed as expressions of legitimacy in medieval European urban landscapes, or Guernsey (2012: 159–160) for similar issues in ancient Mesoamerica.
 - 26 The text panel adjacent to the ruler and ancestor on El Baúl Stela 1 also contrasts with the anonymity of the potbellies, which lack hieroglyphic inscription of any sort. For a rare exception, see the Colonia Alvaro Obregón potbelly, which is inscribed with a glyphic cartouche that, in my opinion, was added long after its initial carving (Guernsey 2012: 95).
 - 27 The disembodied Monte Alto heads, as one important manifestation of the potbelly sculpture tradition, also illustrate how an established sculptural form in Mesoamerica – monumental, disembodied heads – was reinvented during the Late Preclassic period. While the Early and Middle Preclassic monumental heads of San Lorenzo, La Venta, and Tres Zapotes are individualized, each with unique characteristics, the overarching sensibility of the Monte Alto monuments is one of homogeneity. The Monte Alto heads demonstrate that a traditional art form in Mesoamerica was transformed from a site of individuality to one of corporate identity (Guernsey 2012).
 - 28 De la Fuente (1977: 185–186) suggested that La Venta Monument 56 anticipated the tenoned pedestal sculptures more frequently associated with Late Preclassic sites.
 - 29 See, for example, Parsons (1986: 23, figs. 35–37), who illustrated three pedestal sculptures, one from Kaminaljuyu, one attributed to Tecpan or Patzún, and a third listed from the Valley of Antigua, which portray a recurring type of

individual. The hats worn by the three individuals, which rise in flat, rounded tiers, compare to the hat worn by a ceramic figurine illustrated in Kidder and Samayoa (1959: fig. 6). Anthropomorphic figures also appear on two pedestals from Finca Pacaño, Patzicía, Chimaltenango. Their protruding bellies suggest a relationship with potbelly sculptures, while their upturned heads, raised arms, and flexed legs point to connections with Olmec “dwarf” sculptures (Guernsey 2012: 50–51, fig. 3.14). Robinson (2005; Robinson et al. 2008) described how the Finca Pacaño monuments marked a ritually significant site near Julimax Cave and two natural springs; they also show evidence of having been exposed to fire, perhaps in ancient rituals. The Finca Pacaño pedestals evidence a certain amount of formal and thematic fluidity between categories of sculpture during the Pre-classic period.

- 30 Fahsen (2010: 241) discussed the context of Monument 10, as well as additional pedestal sculptures, in Structure J7-4B at El Portón (Sharer and Sedat 1987: 6). He suggested that they, along with associated stelae and altars, demonstrated “a memory of place” preserved through many phases of construction during the course of Structure J7-4B’s history.
- 31 The pedestal now resides in the Las Ilusiones Museum in Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. However, according to Oswaldo Chinchilla (personal communication, 2016), Don Ricardo Muñoz (the former owner of the finca and founder of the Santa Leticia Cotzumalguapa museum) claimed that it did not come from the site of Cotzumalguapa. Another pedestal from near the site of Tajumulco, San Marcos, Chiapas, may be related, although the drawing published by Tejada (1947: 121, no. 8) makes it difficult to discern whether the figure’s face is fleshed or skeletal. This figure adopts a different posture and is seated, with knees drawn up to chest, elbows perched on the knees, and hands clasped beneath the chin. In a note, Tejada added that this pedestal sculpture was reported to be from Tumbador, rather than Tajumulco proper, and had been moved “to the Cuartel Militar in San Marcos, where General Ydígoras Fuentes had set up a departmental museum.” This pedestal, along with a handful of other sculptures, was not reported or described in the Dutton and Hobbs (1943) publication on the archaeology of Tajumulco in spite of the fact that Tejada’s publication was designed as an “illustrated supplement” to their monograph. The sculptural assemblage at Tajumulco and its environs is eclectic and, as I have written before (Guernsey 2012: 81), its stylistic diversity and problematic archaeological contexts make dating any of it very difficult.
- 32 This pedestal sculpture from Izapa bears some similarity to another more fragmentary example from Kaminaljuyu (Parsons 1986: fig. 39), although the kneeling posture differs. Also see the nearly naked individual seated on a pedestal sculpture illustrated by Seler (1901: fig. 276; Weeks 2003: fig. 276) and said to come from a finca east of Comitán, Chiapas. Although there is nothing overt about this individual to suggest he represents a captive, his nearly naked state – which likely signifies a certain level of humility or degradation – contrasts with the highly decorated shaft of the monument. For other pedestal sculptures portraying fragmentary human bodies about which it is difficult to say much of any significance, see Parsons (1986: figs. 38, 39) and Lothrop (1933: fig. 63b, c).
- 33 Shook (1971: 74) cautioned that silhouette sculptures have been securely documented only at Kaminaljuyu or in its immediate surroundings. See Miles (1965: fig. 16f) for a silhouette sculpture attributed to Takalik Abaj.
- 34 I refer readers to Henderson’s much more detailed discussion of silhouette sculpture and its significance in the Guatemalan Highlands and here, instead, briefly summarize what I perceive to be the most salient issues concerning the relationship between silhouette sculptures and representation of the human form during the Late Preclassic period.
- 35 Henderson (2013: 149 n. 9) noted, however, that Parsons (1986: 65, fig. 68) described silhouette Sculpture 27 from Kaminaljuyu as carved on both sides, an

- observation impossible to confirm since the sculpture is now lost and extant photographs show only one side of it.
- 36 Ohi and Torres (1994: 165, F-10) presented another example that portrays an individual perched on a bench with one leg dangling down.
 - 37 Although one can justifiably argue that individuals seated on benches possess an elevated social status, this assumption is complicated by the fact that animals, too, perch on similar seats within the mushroom stone corpus. This commonality lends credence to Ohi and Torres's (1994: 48) suggestion that the animals on mushroom tones symbolized supernatural patrons or alter-egos.
 - 38 Izapa Stela 2 (Fig. 7.3) offers a case in point: it portrays an individual whose face is distinctly human but whose body morphs into that of an avian. The same can be said about both of the characters on Takalik Abaj Altar 12 (Fig. 7.7b), each of which bears attributes that suggest a supernatural identity, from the serpentine projection that emanates from the face of the larger figure to the strangely clawed feet of the more diminutive one. The same holds true for Takalik Abaj Altar 13 (Chinchilla 2015: fig. 7), where the eyes of the figure in the lower right are obscured by a curving band or visor. Chinchilla (2015: 776–777) disputed – and corrected – James Porter's original drawing of this feature (see Graham and Benson 2005: fig. 6), which erroneously included a *k'in* ("sun") sign on the visor. Chinchilla did not question, however, the supernatural identity of the figure, whose net skirt and other attributes link it to early representations of the Maize God. Other monuments are less ambiguous: the figures on Takalik Abaj Stela 5 appear fully human, with naturalistic anatomical features (Fig. 6.8). To be fair, the state of preservation of any given monument either aids or deters one's ability to determine the nature of the individual portrayed. For example, it is difficult to discern in the eroded features of the two protagonists on the front of Stela 5 whether their eyes – a telling trait – are rendered naturalistically or bear the hallmarks of godly vision (see Houston et al. 2006: 170 for discussion). But photographs taken with raking light by the University of California Berkeley Abaj Takalik Project shortly after discovery of the monument (Fig. 6.5b) make clear that the L-shaped eyes attributed to the protagonists in Porter's early drawing of Stela 5 (see Graham and Benson 2005: fig. 8), an attribute associated with gods in later periods, were a figment of the illustrator's imagination.
 - 39 Also see Assmann (2011: 38), who wrote, "Through memory, history becomes myth. This does not make it unreal – on the contrary, this is what makes it real, in the sense that it becomes a lasting, normative, and formative power." Or, as he stated even more bluntly several pages later, "These conceptual pairs [myth and history] . . . have been long due for the scrap heap" (Assmann 2011: 59).
 - 40 Winter (2010: 87) argued that, while there is no evidence during the first millennium BC that Mesopotamian kings were formally deified, their representations nevertheless carried indicators of "special divine protection and involvement."
 - 41 For example, as addressed previously, headdresses were often the place where symbols, specific to discrete individuals, were placed. A tradition of utilizing headdresses as the location of nominals persevered into later periods as well (Kelley 1982; Schele and Mathews 1998: 119–122; Stuart 2012: 135). However, as Houston (2004: 288–290) observed, the lack of redundancy of names in Preclassic monuments suggests that headdresses were not "purely nominal in function."
 - 42 For comparable discussion of the insertion of medieval kings' bodies into mythic frameworks, which envisioned them as immutable in time, see Kantorowicz (1997: 8, 9, 275–276). Featherstone et al. (1999: 5) noted that the body as a central metaphor of political and social order is a recurring theme in much scholarship, with Kantorowicz's work serving as an early and influential model.
 - 43 Also see Joyce and Hendon (2000), who followed Connerton (1989) in their discussion of the ways in which architecture was used as a form of inscriptional practice given monumental form.

- 44 Also see Assmann's (2011: 40) discussion of cultural memory. Although far too complex to address here, his points about the ways in which its effective communication both requires obligatory participation and "withholds the right to participate" are pertinent here.
- 45 Kaplan (1995) noted that there are at least seven stone thrones known from Kaminaljuyu.
- 46 Although this topic exceeds the boundaries of this study, productive models for thinking further about these issues in Mesoamerica (albeit with the recognition that the structures of authority were configured differently) can be found in the work of scholars working in the Old World. See, for example, Baines and Yoffee's (1998) and Parker's (2011) discussions of "inner" and "provincial" elites in the maintenance of royal power and ideological systems in Mesopotamia.
- 47 Her choice of the word "hegemonic" was based on Antonio Gramsci's (1971) consideration of the nature of control exerted by ruling classes over subordinate groups, in which he preferred "hegemony" over "dominance." For Gramsci, hegemony "was not exercised as a form of dominance" but, instead, predicated on the continued negotiation of consent (Tzanetou 2012: 28).
- 48 This quote, in Tzanetou (2012: 28), comes from Fiske (1992: 91).
- 49 Mora-Marín (2018: 102) argued that most of the individuals on Sculpture 65 bear an element in their headdresses that may have identified them. If so, then the identity and relative status of the individuals portrayed may have been clearer in the ancient past to those able to read and understand the significance of these signs.
- 50 But see Pasztory (2005: 82), who argued that, in Mesoamerica as with other non-Western cultures, "the aim of archaic things was the expression of power rather than beauty."

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